

ENTERPRISE -

Scotpress

LOG

55

ENTRIES



a STAR TREK
fanzine

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Illustrations

A.H. ; Cover; P44
 Martin Delaney: P6, 10, 12

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Editors - Sheila Clark, Valerie Piacentini

Typing - Valerie Piacentini

Proofreading - Sheila Clark

Printing - Janet Quarton & James T.

Collating - Sheila's Chain Gang - Frances Abernethy, Lorraine Goodison,
 Hilde McCabe, Cory King, Allison Rooney.

Distracting - Shona

Stencil Chewing - Shah

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Sheila Clark

6 Craigmill Cottages

Strathmartine

By Dundee

Scotland.

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June, 1983.

Hello, and welcome to Enterprise - Log Entries 55.

When Janet was feeding her latest pet the other week, she made an interesting discovery. (Actually, she was transferring our printing records onto her new Spectrum computer, but her well-known fondness for machines has brought me to consider the monster almost alive - I'm not mechanically minded.)

Anyway, she discovered that this issue of Enterprise - Log Entries is the 100th zine we have put out since Janet and Sheila took over STAG. I won't blind you with the count of stencils typed, tubes of ink used, boxes of paper printed, etc., but it's a lot. (Just ask the Chain Gang.)

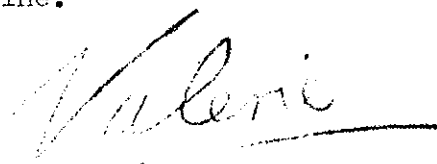
Our printing schedule is running well (touch wood) and in fact Sheila and I have begun to say jokingly, "The August zines are now ready. October's will be delayed two months." Actually, we're not quite that far ahead, but barring unforeseen random factors, our printing schedule for the rest of 1983 looks set fair.

Of course, this has been due to the marvellous response of our writers and artists, who are sending us contributions regularly. Don't rest on your laurels, though, folks - we do have a few gaps, and there's still 1984!

I must mention here that the cover for Enterprise - Log Entries 54 was by A.H. We hadn't decided what illo to use when the stencils were finished, and I'm afraid we forgot to credit the artist on the title page.

This issue of Enterprise - Log Entries is intended for Sol III, and we hope to see many of you there. Do come up and say hello - even if we're busy, we do like to put a face to the name on orders and submissions.

Well, I'll leave you now to enjoy the zine.



Submissions of fiction, poetry or artwork are always welcome for Scotpress zines, and should be sent to

Sheila Clark
6 Craigmill Cottages
Strathmartine
by Dundee
Scotland

or

Valerie Piacentini
20 Ardrossan Road
Saltcoats
Ayrshire
Scotland

A DANGEROUS GAMBLE

by

C. E. Hall

Spock came to his senses slowly. As consciousness returned there came great waves of pain, mainly from his legs and lower back. He put his mind to subduing the sensations, and they gradually subsided, allowing him to think more clearly. He shook his head groggily, trying to clear both his vision and his memory. The movement re-started a trickle of blood from a head wound, and he raised a hand to brush it from his eyes as he began to remember.

He pushed himself up and tried to rise, but his legs would not obey him. Resting on his arms, he looked about him. He was still on the rough path through the forest along which the Vardans had dragged him, but there was no sign whatsoever of his attackers now.

He began to remember more clearly what had happened. The landing party had barely had time to report their safe transportation before they had been viciously attacked by a horde of yelling savages armed with sticks and clubs. There had been no chance for anyone to draw weapons to defend themselves. Not even the alert security guards had managed it, for the attack had been swift and violent.

Spock thought back. He had not seen all of them fall, but he very much feared that the rest of his party had all been killed. He and Jorgens, his geologist, had backed up a path leading from the clearing, trying to protect themselves, but Jorgens had soon succumbed to a blow on the head, and had fallen. Spock had been unable to go to his aid, as he was being hard-pressed by several fierce assailants, and was being forced back down the path. One of the heavy staves wielded by a native had knocked his feet from under him. He had fallen heavily, and had collected a rain of blows about his back and shoulders.

But then, he recalled, something odd had happened. A sharp stone had struck his forehead, and instinctively he had raised his hand to brush away the trickle of blood that had threatened to obscure his vision. Then he realised that the attack had ceased. The natives had backed away, with very odd expressions on their faces. As his senses had finally failed and he had dropped to the ground, he had had the distinct impression that they had all turned and fled.

He was not sure how long he had been unconscious, though it must have been some while, as he could see that the shadows had lengthened over the sunlit paths. He tried again to rise, but found that there was no response from his injured legs, which seemed to be paralysed.

He reached to his belt for his communicator, but as soon as he drew it out it all but fell to pieces in his hand. It was obviously useless, damaged beyond repair. He looked back along the path, and could just see a pair of black boots sticking out from behind a low bush, boots which he assumed, correctly, belonged to Jorgens.

Painfully, he began to drag himself back along the path towards the man. It was exhausting, and extremely painful to his back. There was little feeling in his legs, which was worrying.

As he got nearer to the body it became obvious to him that the man was dead, his skull smashed in by the heavy blow he had taken. He continued to approach the corpse, however, and reaching under it felt his fingers close on the man's communicator. He drew it out, and was relieved to find that it seemed undamaged. Quickly he adjusted the setting, and thumbed it into action.

"Enterprise! Come in, Enterprise!" he said.

There was no response. It sounded as though the small instrument was calling correctly, but there was no response on the receiving channel, apart from the muted chatter of static. He gazed at it morosely. It was possible that

it was damaged in some way he could not see, but it was unlikely. It seemed more feasible that there was no response because the Enterprise was just not there to reply. That was not a pleasing thought! It was bad enough to be injured and alone, but to be deserted as well was devastating. If he had been a man given to succumbing to emotion, he would have been swept away by despair.

But, being a Vulcan, he set about looking for something practical to do. Perhaps if he found the rest of the landing party he might discover another communicator. Then he could verify whether the one he had just tried was faulty or not.

He began pulling himself back towards the clearing where they had made their landing. It was a slow business, and drained all his meagre reserves of strength. At last he came to a clearing and looked around. He thought he had reached the right one, but now he began to have doubts, as it was completely empty. Had he mistaken the way?

He dragged himself a little further, and found macabre confirmation. The crushed grass still bore dark stains of blood. So what had become of the bodies of the rest of the landing party? Had the Vardans taken them? If so, why had they not taken Jorgens as well?

Could they have been recovered by the Enterprise? But if that was the answer, why was there no search under way for Jorgens and himself? He tried the communicator again. It seemed to be working perfectly, but there was still no response from it. Had the Enterprise really gone, without even trying to find him? Surely Jim would not do that!

These thoughts, which would have caused deep depression in anyone other than a Vulcan, were interrupted. His sensitive hearing had picked up a slight sound behind him. Laboriously he turned himself round, preparing to meet another attack, knowing that it would probably mean his death, as he was quite unable to defend himself adequately.

From between the trees and bushes round the clearing a crowd of the natives were advancing upon him, but this time it was different. They were not in the least aggressive, charging and yelling as before; instead they were creeping forward tentatively, their eyes alight with fear and apprehension. The leading ones were carrying something, not ferocious weapons but - most surprisingly - trays of fruit decorated with brightly-coloured flowers. As they neared him they dropped to their knees and pushed the trays towards him. It was almost as if they were making peace-offerings, trying to placate him. Why? He was clearly no threat to them.

He wished he could communicate with them, to ask them what their intentions were, but he had heard enough of their guttural language during the attack to know that it was not one he could understand. Unpleasant as the thought was, he must consider linking minds with one of them.

He eyed the approaching group. The nearest one was a big, heavily-built youngster, who did not look all that intelligent. Perhaps a simpler mind would be easier to reach. He put all his concentration into it, willing the man to come closer and permit him to touch him.

His pale, frightened eyes held by the dark alien ones, the man crept nearer. When he was close enough the Vulcan stretched out his hand. The youngster shied away like a frightened animal, but gradually the strength of the Vulcan's will calmed him, and he allowed Spock's hand to rest on his face.

As Spock entered the Vardan's mind his Vulcan sense of orderliness was repelled by the confusion there. There was a pandemonium of terror and panic. Concentrating hard, he calmed the chaos down until he could attempt communication.

//Do not be so frightened,// he projected. //I will not harm you.//

//Please do not strike us down, lord,// was the tremulous response. //We only wish to serve you.//

//Why do you seek to serve me? You killed the other who were with me.//

//You are not like them, master. You are a d'wari, a magical lord. We did not know it until we saw the green of your blood. We beg forgiveness for having harmed you. Please do not punish us. We will do all we can to serve you.//

Intrigued, Spock probed a little further into the man's mind, and found a welter of primitive fears and superstitions, including a deep reverential belief in the 'd'waris', whom they feared as being capable of strange mystical powers, and with the ability to destroy at a stroke.

Even though he knew that he couldn't live up to their strange beliefs, Spock realised that he might well be able to use the fear and awe that they felt to his own advantage. He considered carefully, and then began to project a deliberately forceful image.

//Your attack has angered me. I shall judge your contrition by the way you serve me, and reserve my decision on retribution until later.// The words were high-sounding on purpose, to impress.

The Vardan turned and passed on the conversation to his companions, speaking in the rough guttural tongue Spock had heard before. He had evidently put the right kind of impression into the man's mind, for at the end of his words the Vardans, looking very cowed, prostrated themselves in front of the 'd'wari', fearing his vengeance.

Spock continued his communication with the man before him, to reinforce his position.

//You I have chosen to be the one to relay my wishes to the others. Have you a name?//

//Yes, Lord. I am called Somi,// replied the man. //How shall we call you, Lord? You are different, so your name must be different too.//

//I am Vulcan,// thought Spock, his usual reply to comments on the difference in his appearance.

The man misunderstood slightly. //Then we shall call you Vulcan Lord. Is that pleasing to you?//

//It will serve,// replied Spock. He was beginning, in his weakened state, to feel the strain of maintaining the link, so he gave one last order. //Show me how well you can serve.//

Given something definite to do, the natives set to work with a bustle of activity. A dozen pairs of hands worked swiftly together, constructing a carrying litter from branches and interwoven vines and leaves. When it was ready they approached their new-found d'wari in a suitably servile manner, and lifting him gently onto the litter, bore him back to their village.

Springy though the litter was, and well-padded with leaves and grasses, the journey became an agony for the injured Vulcan, and by the time the party reached the village he was almost unconscious. This worried him, as he feared that he would lose his control over the superstitious people, and so he struggled to stay awake.

But as he read the simple minds of those who came near enough to touch him, he found that his fears were unjustified. The natives, he discovered, had decided that their d'wari was testing them to see how much care they would shower upon him. So he relaxed his efforts, and almost in a coma allowed them to bear him into a large building.

There, they tended him most carefully. They brought warm, scented water and washed the dirt and blood from his body. They dressed him in clean clothing and finally placed him gently in a large, comfortable bed.

It wasn't till considerably later, when his mind had regained its usual clarity, that he began to think about the contrast between this luxury and the

simple life of the natives, with their clothes made of skins and their huts built of branches and mud. Then, he questioned, and found strange, unexpected answers.

Somi, who had taken charge, being the one chosen by the d'wari, ordered all the other curious villagers away.

"We must not anger our d'wari by disturbing his rest," he declared in self-important tones, proud of his new status. "When he is ready, he will tell us how to serve him."

Exhausted by pain, but more comfortable now, Spock slept quietly. Part of his mind toiled to effect healing on his injured body, but it was only partially successful, as the damage was severe, and beyond even his great power.

* * *

Light years away across the galaxy, McCoy strove desperately to deal with a distraught Captain, whose moods alternated between deep grief, raging anger, and nagging guilt.

Two weeks had passed since the fateful visit to Varda, and the Captain was still in a state of confusion and agitation. It still hurt desperately to remember.

The landing party of scientists, led by Spock, had beamed down to the apparently peaceful green and blue planet, and had reported their safe arrival. Those on board the Enterprise had waited in relaxed and blissful ignorance for their first report to come in. It hadn't come.

When the delay had reached a worrying length the relaxed mood had quickly vanished, and a period of frantic activity had started. Repeated calls had failed to raise any answer, then the sensors had come up with ominous readings.

A rescue party had beamed down immediately, and had found the stricken landing party - or rather, all that remained of them. Even the security men, hardened to death in many forms, had been shaken by the carnage they had found. The pitiful bodies had been beamed back to the ship, where it was swiftly learned that two members were unaccounted for. Spock and Jorgens were still missing.

Scotty had immediately begun to re-calibrate the sensors to search for the missing men, but found he was still hampered by the natural interference which had bothered them when they had tried to scan the planet before. Patches of some material, natural to the planet, fuzzed and broke up his readings. Cursing silently under his breath, he persevered - but it was going to be difficult.

Just as an anxious Captain Kirk was about to call the rescue party again, to give them orders to spread out in a careful search for the missing pair, he was interrupted. Uhura was getting a priority call from Starfleet Headquarters. Kirk answered impatiently, and was not pleased by what he heard; the Enterprise was needed elsewhere. A nearby outpost, with important scientific establishments on it, was under attack by Klingons, and in serious danger of being over-run and occupied. The Enterprise was to go at once and prevent this.

Desperately Kirk tried to explain his problem, and begged for a little time to find his lost men; his plea was peremptorily refused. The Admiral was sorry, but X201 was an absolutely vital station. If the Klingons took it and learned its secrets, millions would perish on planets all over the galaxy. Two men's lives could not be counted against that. Besides, as the Admiral had argued, judging by what had happened to the rest of the party, the missing men were probably already dead.

So Kirk had had to call back his rescue party and leave at top speed. He had reached X201 in record time, and engaged the Klingons. It had been a pretty desperate battle, too, which for a while he'd looked like losing; but then two other Starships had arrived, the tide of battle had gradually turned, and eventually the last Klingon ship had been destroyed.

But the cost had been severe. One Starship had been lost, another badly damaged, and the Enterprise herself was limping towards the nearest Starbase,

needing extensive repairs.

In between dealing with his many patients, for casualties had been heavy, McCoy had tried to give as much time as he could to Kirk, who was still bedevilling himself with a myriad of unanswerable questions.

"Suppose they weren't dead, Bones?" he said for the umpteenth time. "Suppose we could have saved them?"

"Jim, you mustn't torture yourself so," said McCoy. "You did what you had to."

"Someday I'll find out," cried Kirk, and the futile anger rose in his eyes again. "If I find that they could have been saved, I'll never forgive the Admiral."

"Jim, be fair," pleaded McCoy. "It's not the Admiral's fault. He only did what he had to, as well. As he said, two lives against millions, and in any case, the two were probably lost already."

The nagging doubts surfaced in Kirk again, along with the irrational pangs of guilt. "But what if they weren't, Bones? I keep getting the awful picture of Spock calling for my help, and then discovering that I'd left him... abandoned him."

"Spock would have known that you'd never have done so from choice," soothed McCoy. "He trusted you."

"I know," said Kirk. "That's what haunts me. He trusted me! Did I betray that trust?"

Nothing McCoy could say helped at all. The praise and congratulations showered upon the Enterprise did little to ease the torment either. Oh, he'd done his duty, he knew that, and being the man he was, he could not have done otherwise. The conscience of the officer-in-command, Captain Kirk, was clear; but the heart of the man James Kirk was grieved and uncomfortable.

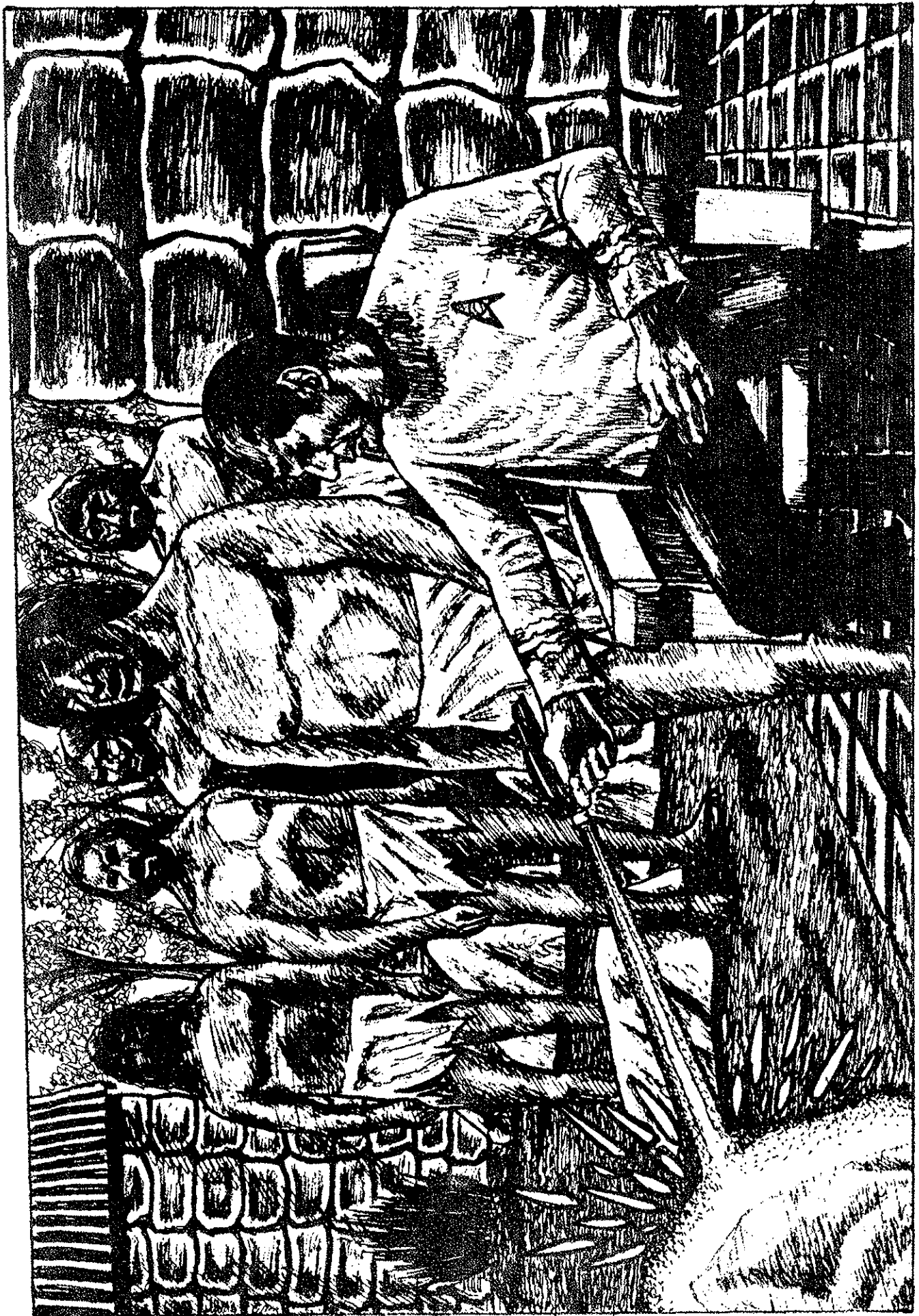
* * *

His misery would have been even greater if he'd known the truth, or had even suspected Spock's desperate situation. The Vulcan was not faring well. The care given to him by the Vardans had helped a little, and the many hours of sleep had restored some of his strength, but he soon found that the condition of his injured body was not much improved. At first he'd thought that the lessening of pain was due to the stronger control of his improved mental powers, but he soon recognised that it was not so. The fact was that increasing paralysis and numbness were together blocking out sensation. He could no longer feel his legs at all, and pulling himself into a sitting position was harder than before.

And, as he thought carefully over his sorry situation, he realised that he had another problem. His position was d'wari was far from secure. Although the natives had waited patiently for him to recover, he could sense in them an expectancy, a waiting, for the d'wari to show some signs of the great powers they all believed him to possess. So, as the days passed, and he did very little, he began to notice a growing impatience and dissatisfaction among the more aggressive of them. He confirmed this in his communication with Somi, but this native, gentler-natured than most, was strong in defence of his lord. He chided the others for their impatience, implying that the d'wari was just testing them, and would act when he was ready.

He did have one better moment. The natives had been scouting around in the forest, and had returned, bringing something they'd found. It was a phaser, either his or that of Jorgens, dropped during the attack on them. Neither had been able to use them before they had been struck from their hands by the fierce clubs of the attacking Vardans.

Spock took the weapon into his hands and examined it quickly. To his great relief he found that the safety-catch had been pushed on, this making it safe in ignorant hands. Thoughts of the weapon's indiscriminate use by the unskilled



natives, if it had not been so, were daunting in the extreme.

Somi, full of curiosity, was hovering by his chair. //What is it, Vulcan Lord?// he asked.

//In the right hands - power,// replied Spock.

//What can it do?// persisted Somni. //Show us, Vulcan Lord.//

Spock considered for a moment. Though 'showing off' was not his habit, it might be politic to impress these natives a little, just to improve his own standing.

//I will show you,// he said, and primed by Somi's excited cries the natives gathered round eagerly.

He was sitting in a chair in a stone verandah outside the building where he lived. Somi had moved him there after breakfast, as he did daily. He looked around for a suitable target. A large boulder caught his eye, and he trained the weapon upon it.

//Watch,// he said. //It can be gentle...//

The natives gazed in awe as the rock began to glow redder and redder.

//... or fierce!//

The rock disintegrated and vanished as he switched to full power.

The simple natives were impressed. They dropped to their knees and bowed humbly before their d'wari, convinced by the display that he did indeed have special powers.

Spock slipped the safety catch back on the phaser, and concealed it down the side of his chair. He made a mental note to ensure that it didn't leave his control - it would be a menace in the wrong hands. But it had served its purpose. Through Somi he could feel the renewed attitude of trust in him, accompanied by a fair ration of awe. But the next communication from Somi he found rather disturbing.

//That is powerful magic, Vulcan Lord,// Somi enthused, //just like that of the d'waris who left us.//

Spock gave Somi his full attention as the implications of that thought registered. Who were the visitors who had been here before? And by the sound of it, the visitors had evidently been equipped with phasers, or something equivalent. They must have been of a more advanced culture than the simple natives, for without doubt it was they who had built and furnished the building in which he was housed. Who were they? Why had they come? And, why had they left?

For nearly an hour he probed and questioned Somi's mind, finding out what the strangers had done. It wasn't till halfway through his interrogation that he thought to enquire what they had looked like, and the answer shook him. Although Somi's description was simple and basic, the images in his mind reinforced it, leaving no room for doubt. The previous visitors had been Klingons!

Spock turned this disturbing thought over in his mind. What had Klingons been doing here? he mused. What could they possibly want on this primitive world? He questioned Somi intensively as to what the men had actually done. Somi described how the visitors had gone about the neighbouring countryside, making holes in rocks, digging in the earth, and collecting quantities of stones. He didn't understand why they had done it. They hadn't let the people help in the search, nor had they given them any idea what they were looking for.

With his experience Spock could give a better interpretation to the actions that had puzzled the simple Somi and the others. The Klingons were evidently searching for some form of mineral deposit. The thought only raised more questions. What was it they were looking for? Had they left because they had not found it, or because they had, and were going away to organise plans to collect it in quantity? Would they soon be back - in force?

With this thought in mind, and the desire to find the answers, Spock gave Somi special instructions to pass on to the other natives. If any more visitors did arrive, they were not to kill them, but to bring them straight to him. As later events turned out, it was very fortunate that he had given those orders.

But Somi's report showed him that they had not gone down well with the majority of the natives. The previous d'waris had encouraged the natives to kill all intruders, for of course it suited their interests. Spock's order revoking this only served to increase the suspicion of the most warlike of the natives that their present d'wari was weak and inactive when compared to his predecessors. It undid all the good that his display with the phaser had done.

* * *

Half a galaxy away a repaired and refitted Enterprise set out into space again. She carried a full crew, with one exception. Kirk had demanded time to consider the available applicants before replacing his First Officer, and the Admiral had allowed it. Kirk was in good favour after his heroic defence of X201, but also the Admiral had sincere regrets about the way Kirk had lost his men without being sure of their fate. He had had no option, when he had given his orders, just as Kirk had had none when he obeyed them, but he knew that the Vulcan had been a personal friend of Captain Kirk, as well as an exceptional First Officer, and he made allowances for his grief.

As was customary if possible after a refit, the ship was allowed ample time to reach its next destination, allowing for any running-in problems with the new engines. But with Scotty's expert attention the 'shake-down' manoeuvres were practiced without incident, and with time in hand the Enterprise was proceeding at cruising speed to attend a ceremonial occasion at a planet which had recently joined the Federation.

Kirk lounged in the command chair, knowing that there would be no great demands for him to meet in the coming trip. A pity, for when there was nothing to command his attention fully it allowed him to think and brood excessively. He tried hard to control his mind and the direction of his thoughts, but usually he failed miserably.

//I just don't have your self-discipline, Spock, he thought. At the sound of his friend's name - only in his mind, for he hadn't spoken aloud - all the old guilt and unhappiness swept back. //If only I knew what really happened! he agonised inwardly.

A sudden audacious idea swept into his mind. Galvanised into action, he leapt from his chair and moved down between Chekov and Sulu at the helm. Quickly he demanded information of star-charts, distances, speeds and times. He kept the two young officers so busy with his demands that they didn't have time to work out what was on his mind.

But McCoy, who had happened to come onto the Bridge just after all this activity had started, was able to see the overall picture, and was astute enough to see what Jim's intention was. Putting one hand on his friend's arm, he drew him back to the command chair and expressed his objections in a suppressed whisper.

"Jim," he said urgently, "you can't do it. Not without orders."

"Why not?" demanded Kirk tensely. "Come to that, no-one need know. I could swear the whole crew to secrecy, and ..."

McCoy grabbed his friend by the shoulders and shook him gently. "Jim, stop it," he pleaded. "You're letting the idea run away with you. I could declare you unfit for duty, you know that."

"Bones, please!" begged Kirk. "Don't you see? I've got to know!"

The anguish in his face tore at McCoy's feelings, but he continued his protests. "Jim, you know what happened last time. The landing party was attacked and wiped out. If that should happen again, who's going to explain it,

especially as we're not even supposed to be in the area."

"I'll take full responsibility," said Kirk, "and absolve everybody else."

"Fat lot of good that would be!" snapped McCoy, fast getting totally exasperated.

"Bones," said Kirk, returning to his pleading, "don't you see? I must end the uncertainty. Even if we only find a grave, or even a body to bury..."

McCoy felt his resistance weakening. He knew he had the same need as Kirk to know the truth, and in addition he had the feeling that the continuing uncertainty would destroy either Kirk's career or his sanity.

Kirk stood up suddenly, and looked his friend straight in the eye. "I'm going to do it, Bones," he said firmly, "and if you try to stop me by declaring me unfit, I'll do it anyway."

"And risk your career?" said McCoy.

"For what Spock meant to me, yes!" said Kirk.

McCoy gave in. Kirk was obviously determined, and the doctor had the feeling that before this was over Jim would need the help and support of a real friend.

Things moved quickly after that. Kirk asked Sulu and Chekov directly to work out details that would enable them to divert to Varda for a short visit and still reach Merindo in time for the official ceremonies. They did the necessary computations with speed and efficiency, and passed them on to their Captain.

It meant asking for a higher speed and more engine power. When Scotty heard that, he came charging up to the Bridge seeking an explanation. When he got it he began to add his protests. McCoy stepped in to halt him.

"It's no good reasoning with him, Scotty. I've tried all the arguments, believe me." He looked the Engineer straight in the eye and added, "I think he needs our support on this, Scotty." He didn't put into words his real fears, which were that Kirk was becoming obsessive, and might well crack up altogether if thwarted now.

Scotty decided to trust the doctor's insight and judgement. He was still muttering and protesting under his breath, but he soon had it all organised, and coaxed the extra out of his engines as required.

Three days later they were in orbit around Varda. Scanners were put into action immediately, but they encountered the same disrupting influence as before. They did find an area which the sensors suggested was a native settlement, but it also seemed to be the area most affected by the disruption, so no reliable details were available.

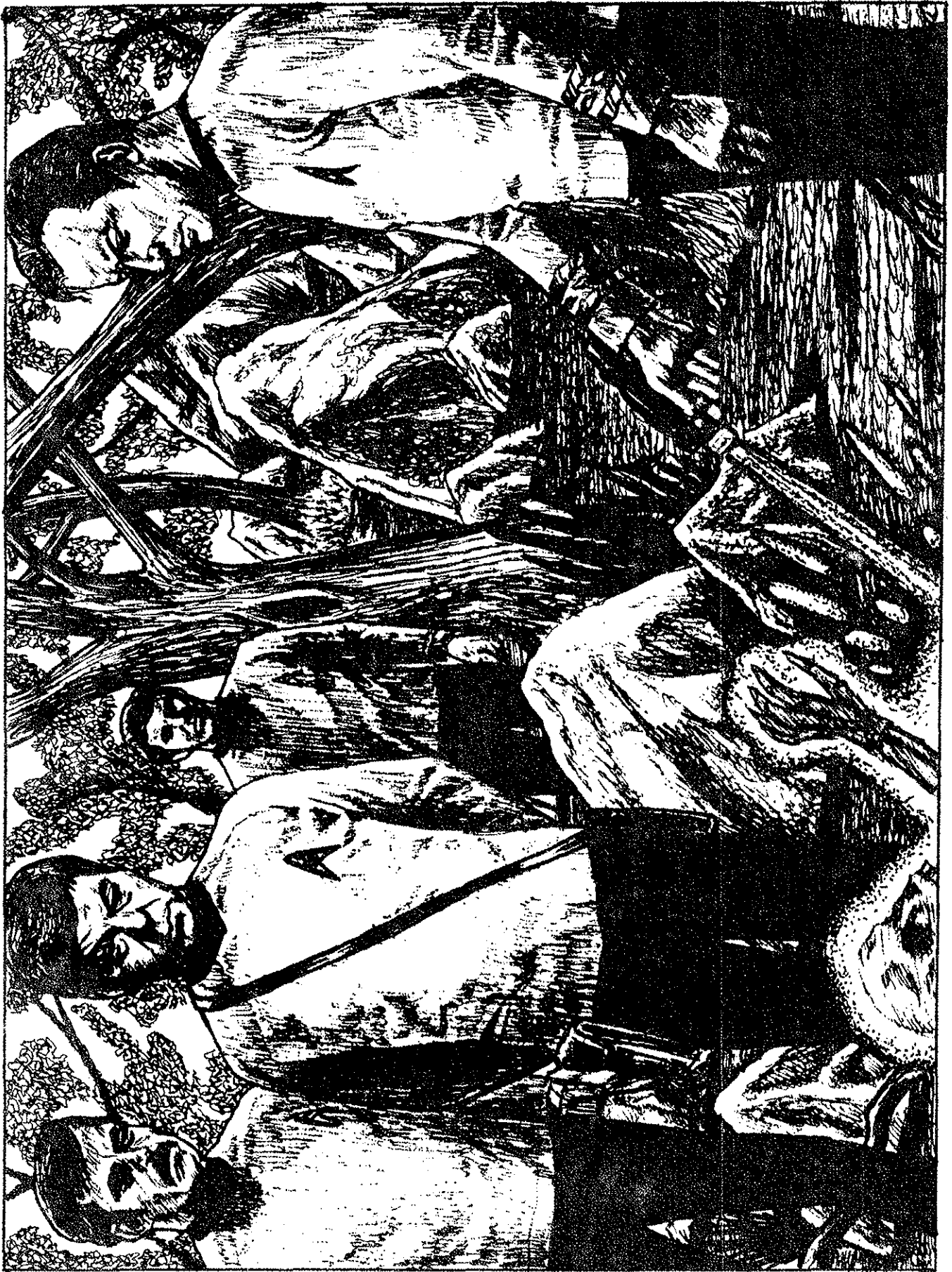
At first Kirk seemed determined to beam down alone, to relieve everyone else of culpability should something go wrong, but McCoy refused point-blank to allow this. He insisted on the presence of a couple of heavily-armed Security men, and also himself. When Kirk protested and attempted to order him off the platform, his retort brooked no argument.

"It's no use arguing, Jim," he said firmly. "I'm coming! If you order me to stay behind I'll just follow as soon as you're down. I can flout orders too, you know."

Kirk gave in. Although he wouldn't have admitted it, he was very fearful of what he might find, and how he would react, and he knew he might be very glad of the doctor's understanding company.

They landed in the same clearing that they had used before. All was quiet. Kirk reported safe arrival, and then began to look about him. There seemed to be only one track out of the clearing, so he led the party in that direction.

But an unpleasant shock awaited them amid the quiet, luxuriant forest. After only a few dozen paces, they came upon all that was left of the unfortunate



Jorgens. Even McCoy, who had seen death in many forms during his long career, turned away in revulsion at the sight.

In an instinctive reaction Kirk drew his phaser and blasted the gruesome thing out of existence. It was an understandable deed, but it was also a bad mistake, as the sound echoed widely through the quiet woods.

Fearful that another few steps might bring him to Spock's body in a similar state, Kirk continued slowly along the path, dreading what he might have to face in a moment. But as he found nothing his steps became bolder, and his spirits rose a little.

The attack, when it came, was swift and violent. All the men had their phasers drawn and ready, and gave a good account of themselves, felling several of the fearsome natives with accurate heavy-stun phaser bursts, but the sheer weight of numbers was too much for them. They were driven to the ground, weapons knocked from their hands by the fierce clubs wielded by the yelling natives.

Their fate might well have been the same as that of the first ill-fated landing party, if someone among the attackers had not suddenly remembered the orders of their latest d'wari.

"Stop! Do not kill them!" he yelled.

The men from the Enterprise did not understand the guttural sounds that they heard, but they did realise that for some reason their luck had held, and the hand of death had been stayed. Clubs and sticks were lowered, as rough hands grabbed the men and hauled them upright.

"Remember what the d'wari said!" yelled the man who had stopped the killing.

There were resentful mutterings among the warriors, cheated of their expected enjoyment, but the superstitious fear of the d'wari's possible retribution held their hands, at least temporarily.

"Let us take them to the Vulcan Lord!" yelled another, and the party began to move off, pushing and dragging their captives with them.

Kirk, stumbling along the rough path in the painful grip of two powerful natives, tried hard to get McCoy's attention. He desperately wanted to ask him, to see if he'd been imagining things. But he was sure he's heard it! Among the guttural sounds emitted by their captors, he was sure he had heard the word 'Vulcan'. If he had, what could it mean? How could they have encountered such a name? Could it possibly mean that Spock was still alive?

He couldn't get close enough to McCoy to ask if he'd heard it too, and as the moment faded he began to doubt himself. Perhaps it had only been his imagination, a wishful thinking, a grabbing at straws. They'd seen what had happened the first landing party, and to Jorgens. How could he entertain the hope that Spock had fared any differently? True, they hadn't actually found his body, but then they'd only seen a tiny part of the woods. They could easily have missed it.

Self-recrimination continued to harass him as he was hustled along the narrow track. McCoy had warned him, hadn't he? But oh no, he wouldn't be told. And now look what had happened. He'd brought them all, including McCoy, into danger and probable death. And he'd learned absolutely nothing!

* * *

Completely unaware of the vital happenings not so far away from him, Spock, tended by Somi, was sitting on the verandah of his abode. Somi was hovering, fussing, because his d'wari had not eaten this morning. In truth, the Vulcan was feeling far from well. There was now no sensation at all in his legs and lower body, but his back ached, and his arms and shoulders felt strained by the extra demands he had put upon them, for he still struggled to move himself from bed to chair, although Somi was more than willing to lift him. He hated his increasing dependence on Somi, though he had come to appreciate the gentle



concern of this particular native, so different from many of the others, who were fierce and very aggressive.

He appreciated, too, that it was only through Somi, and the way he relayed the d'wari's wishes to the others, that he held on at all to the last vestiges of the awe that had saved his life in the first instance. But as his strength waned, he knew that that would fail too. If Somi began to doubt him, the others would soon assert themselves, and would have no hesitation in killing him. He smiled wryly to himself. It was only a matter of time in the race between his death from his injuries, or at the hands of the Vardans. But while his strength lasted he would do his best to inflict a civilising influence on them.

Wearily he rested his elbow on the arm of his chair, and his head on his hand. If only his head did not ache so badly. He seemed to have lost the power to control his body with meditation. He knew Somi was worried because he had not eaten yet today, but the very thought of food made him feel ill. His time was running out, faster than he had expected.

A noise of shouting roused him. Without a great deal of real interest he lifted his head to see the cause - and became instantly alert!

A group of natives was coming along the path out of the woods, shouting wildly and waving their sticks and clubs. But that was not what had grabbed his instant and concentrated attention. Among the dark skins and the brown fur clothes the natives wore, the shirts of their captives showed flashes of brilliant colours, red, blue and gold.

Almost before they were within sufficient distance he had recognised them, instinct helping his sight. He could hardly believe what his senses told him, but he knew it was true. After all this time men from the Enterprise, led by Jim himself, had come looking for him!

Summoning all his reserves of strength he pulled himself upright in his chair, endeavouring to push his mind to work with its usual efficiency. What could he do? He knew, better than the landing party themselves, just what danger the men from the Enterprise were in. Thankfully, the natives had not killed them out of hand, and had brought them to him as he had ordered; but it wasn't an act of mercy on their part, he knew. They were hoping for a spectacular display from the d'wari, something violent and impressive - an execution. How could he save them?

With quite unnecessary ferocity the natives pushed the four men forwards, to fall sprawling at the foot of the steps to the verandah, where the Lord Vulcan was sitting. Then they crowded round and waited expectantly.

Kirk pushed his hands under him on the rough ground and tried to rise, but prods in his back with spears and the ends of sticks kept him down. But he lifted his head and eyes eagerly to confirm what a quick glimpse had shown him as he fell to the ground. His eyes lit with a joyous gleam. It was true! It was Spock sitting in the chair at the top of the steps. His Vulcan friend still lived!

Spock saw the glad light in his Captain's hazel eyes, and felt an answering leap within him. He could see from Jim's expression that he had thought him dead, and was overjoyed to find he was still alive. He would have given anything to have been free to greet his friend with equal gladness, and share the pleasure of their reunion, but apart from the fact that he could not move from his chair, he knew that he dare not even acknowledge that he knew him. He turned his head away sharply and hid behind an upraised hand, for fear that his lack of self-control would show in his expression.

Kirk was shaken. The glad shout that was rising within him died stillborn, and he could only mouth his friend's name silently as he stared in dismay. He was utterly taken aback by the lack of response. The feeling of guilt that had been with him so long rose to the surface again. Was the Vulcan behaving like this because he had taken so long to come looking for him?

//Oh Spock, Spock,// he begged silently, //I couldn't help it. Please give me a chance to explain!//

Somi was hovering excitedly beside Spock, anxious for orders. //What do you want us to do, Vulcan Lord?// he asked. //Will you strike them down now?//

Oh Somi, thought Spock despairingly, you are no better than the others! He was careful not to let that thought reach the waiting man, however. Instead he played for time as an idea grew in his active mind. He pushed forward a delaying suggestion, disguising it with a hint of a display to come, in the hope that that would satisfy the waiting crowd, who were eager for action.

//It will be better if all are gathered to see,// he suggested. //Cage them in a hut until all are gathered, and then bring them to me in the big place.// Part of the elaborate building that the Klingons had constructed was an audience room which was large enough to hold all the native population if they crushed close together.

Somi seemed satisfied with this suggestion of more exciting things to come. He passed the instruction on, and began to get things organised. Some of the natives rushed off to round up their fellows who were occupied elsewhere, to invite them to come and see what the d'wari was going to do. Others hauled the captives roughly to their feet and hurried them off. They thrust them into a large empty hut and barred the door, setting a guard outside.

Kirk grabbed McCoy's arm agitatedly. "Did you see, Bones?" he gasped. "It was Spock! He's alive!"

"Yes, I saw," replied McCoy, trying to calm the Captain's almost hysterical excitement.

"But why didn't he greet us?" puzzled Kirk. "He seemed not to want to see us. Surely he can't be acting like this because we left him?"

"Don't be silly, Jim," said McCoy, giving him a shake. "Spock wouldn't react like that."

"Perhaps it wasn't safe for him to let on that he knew us," suggested one of the Security men.

"That's more like it," agreed McCoy. "Those natives are pretty fierce and unfriendly. Perhaps he has to go carefully himself, though they seem to treat him with some respect. But I bet my bottom dollar he's got some sort of plan under way to help us."

"Yes," agreed Kirk, "I think you've probably got it. We must just all be alert, and ready to go along with any move he makes. Explanations can come later." Reassured, he settled down to await developments.

* * *

Spock, meanwhile, was working on the half-formed plan that was in his mind. He was finding it very difficult. In his state of weakness the shock of suddenly seeing his Captain again had shaken him badly, and he was finding it very hard to recover.

He stared at the pile of equipment lying on the verandah at his feet, the communicators and phasers taken from the captives. He remembered an old fact that he had discovered during his long periods of idleness, tied to a chair, unable to move. Whatever the element was that the Klingons had been searching for, it existed round about the village, and it was evidently the cause of the distortion of instrument readings. But the Klingons had evidently discovered this also, for they had built into their own building some sort of shielding. Inside its walls the communicator worked without any of the noisy static and interference it showed outside.

He got Somi to hand him the communicators. A swift examination showed him that only one was undamaged, so he retained it and discarded the rest. He told Somi to take the phasers into his room and put them carefully on the bed. Somi

did so, showing great respect and care in handling his d'wari's magic tools.

Then the Vulcan got Somi to take him back to his room. One there he demanded privacy, telling Somi that he needed time to gather up his powers. He did get it eventually, but only after he had given in to Somi's persuasion to allow the man to dress him in some of the fancy robes that the Klingons had left. Somi had an instinct for dramatic effect, and he wanted his d'wari to put on a good show.

Feeling somewhat overdressed and uncomfortable, Spock finally persuaded the man to go. He could hear shouts and chattering as a crowd gathered outside, but he knew Somi would not let them in until he had his master ensconced in the big chair on the dais at the end of the audience room. The man would have made a great stage manager!

Spock held the communicator in his hand and marshalled his thoughts. How he would have liked a chance to talk to Kirk once more, to wish him well, and to say a last goodbye. But he dared not risk it. Timing was all-important to his plan. On reflection, he decided that it was probably just as well that there was no time. It would have been an emotional scene, and his defences were too low for him to cope with that.

Besides, he knew that Jim Kirk would demand that he went with them, and he had decided against that. He had two reasons. One was the safety of the landing party. Their only chance of escape was if they went, and went quickly, before the bloodthirsty natives had a chance to stop them; his own helplessness, and his inability to move, would hamper that.

The other reason was much more complex. Stranded on a primitive planet, with no medical facilities at all, he had become resigned to his eventual death from the severe injuries he had sustained, and had accepted the pattern of gradual but inevitable deterioration. He knew, from the expression on Kirk's face when he had first seen him, that his friends had believed him dead. Well, it would soon be true anyway. He would not prolong their grief by going back with them. It would only mean weeks of failing health in Sickbay, having to cope with their emotions, or, perhaps, a solitary death in some impersonal Satrfleet hospital. It would be better if they went alone and left him to die here. Somi would care for him quite adequately, and his concern would not upset him as Kirk's and McCoy's would.

Having resigned himself to ending his days on an uncivilised world with no medical facilities, he had quite forgotten that there was another alternative. He hadn't taken into account the fact that if he could be returned to a civilised environment, either McCoy himself or some other medical specialist might be able to do something about his condition.

He pulled himself up abruptly. He must not let his thoughts wander like this. Somi would soon be back to move him into the audience room, and he must have everything ready by then. With practiced fingers he manipulated the delicate dials of the small communicator, and spoke into it.

"Enterprise," he said. "Come in, Enterprise."

The reply was prompt and clear. "Enterprise. Scott here. Is that you, Captain?"

"Listen please, Mr. Scott - there is little time. Next time this instrument is activated, it will be the Captain. Latch onto his coordinates - they will not be far different from these - and beam the landing party up immediately. Immediately, Mr. Scott - their lives depend on it."

"Understood," acknowledged Scotty. He badly wanted to ask more, but had no chance as the connection was abruptly broken.

Scotty lost no time in getting things in hand. Alerting the transporter operator, he had him poised with the dials in the position for the coordinates he had last received from the communicator, ready to make the small final

adjustments as soon as the next call came in. Then, turning over command to Sulu, he got up to leave the Bridge and go down to supervise the actual transportation personally. As he passed Uhura's chair, he met her eyes.

"I wasn't dreaming, was I, Miss Uhura?" he asked. "That was his voice I heard?"

She looked as doubtful as he felt. "It doesn't seem possible," she began, "but I could swear it was."

"We'll soon know," he replied. "As soon as they beam up."

He quickly made his way down to the transporter room, checked the details on the console, and waited...

* * *

Spock hid the communicator under his clothes and waited for Somi. When the man came he allowed him to carry him into the audience room and settle him in the high-backed chair on the dais. Then Somi went to the door and let the people in. They came crowding and pushing excitedly, jostling each other for a good viewing place. It was very evident that they were expecting their d'wari to give them something spectacular to watch.

When all were in the prisoners were fetched. They were brought in, hustled and pushed - more roughly than was necessary - down to the front of the hall. When they stood at the foot of the dais the crowd retreated a little, leaving them in a clear space. The people were expecting the d'wari to destroy the intruders in some drastic fashion, and although they wanted to see, they didn't want to be too close.

The captives gazed at the figure seated in the throne-like chair. He looked impressive and unfamiliar in the lavish, elaborate robes that Somi had made him wear, and it was evident that the watching natives regarded him with considerable awe. Remembering their conversation earlier in the hut, the four men from the Enterprise stood quietly, their eyes on Spock, ready to respond to any move he made. Kirk stood tensely at the front. He made no move to greet the Vulcan, in case it was dangerous, but his eyes were fixed on the dark ones that gazed back at him with an expression in them that, for once, he could not read at all.

Somi began a diatribe of his own making, extolling the great powers of his master, and telling the people that the d'wari was going to dispose of the intruders in spectacular fashion. Spock followed his thoughts, and made no attempt to stop him, although he knew that he hadn't got it quite right. He hoped that the display he was planning would be sufficient to satisfy the people, though doubtless the more bloodthirsty would feel cheated.

At last Somi ended his oration, and all eyes turned expectantly towards the imposing figure on the platform. Spock gazed at his friends, savouring this one last pleasure. Then he put his plan into action. Drawing the small communicator from under his clothes he tossed it accurately towards Kirk, who caught it neatly.

"Call the ship, Captain," said Spock. "Now!"

Responding to the urgency in the Vulcan's tone, Kirk dropped his eyes and activated the small instrument. There was no immediate reply to his call, but after only a few seconds - though it seemed longer to the tensely watching Vulcan - the familiar sparkle of the transporter beams began to envelop the group. Before the astounded eyes of the natives, the four men totally disappeared! Astonished, many dropped to their knees, awed by the magical powers of their d'wari.

The tale, discussed later, grew in the re-telling. "It was magic," one spectator told another. "He just pointed a finger at them, and they vanished!"

* * *

Aboard the Enterprise no-one was awed by the d'wari's magic. Explanations were rapidly being given and received.

Scotty's curiosity was not to be restrained. "Captain," he said urgently, "that was Mr. Spock we heard, wasn't it?"

"Yes, it was," confirmed Kirk.

Scotty looked puzzled. "Then why didn't he beam up with you?" he asked.

"I'm not sure, Scotty," said Kirk, "but I mean to find out! Have you still got those coordinates?"

McCoy grabbed Kirk's arm. "Hold on, Jim," he said. "You're not meaning to beam straight back down, are you?"

"Why not?" asked Kirk. "I want Spock back."

"Yes, so do I," said McCoy. "But please use your head, Jim."

"What do you mean?" demanded Kirk, impatient at the delay.

"Spock had us beamed out quickly because we were in danger," the doctor pointed out. "Those natives looked pretty unfriendly to me."

"So?" said Kirk, trying to follow his friend's train of thought.

"So, he's probably not too safe either," continued McCoy.

"All the more reason for rescuing him quickly," retorted Kirk.

"Jim," said McCoy soothingly, "if you go charging back in with a team of Security men, lots of people could get hurt, and Spock could be one of them."

"You're not suggesting we leave him, then?" snapped Kirk, his impatience coming to the fore again.

"Of course not!" said the doctor. "But I think we could go about it better."

Knowing that he was in danger of letting his feelings run away with him, Kirk made a conscious effort to calm down, and listened to his friend. "What do you suggest, Bones?" he asked.

"Well, it seems likely that he was alone when he first called and gave instructions to Scotty," explained McCoy. "He might be so again before long. Now we've got the coordinates, the sensors can keep track of him and tell us when he's on his own."

"And then we can beam him out!" interrupted Kirk excitedly. "Well thought out, Bones," he congratulated.

"No, Jim, I don't think it's that way," said McCoy thoughtfully.

"What do you mean now?" Kirk exploded.

"Jim, did you notice? Spock never moved from his chair. He didn't stand up, or come towards us - not once."

"That's true," said Kirk thoughtfully. His mind sought an explanation. "Do you think he's a prisoner, tied to the chair?"

"Not in the way you mean, Jim," said McCoy with a wry smile. "I think he's ill. I think he didn't move because he can't."

Kirk's face was aghast as the idea sank in. He thought back, remembering now how pale and haggard the Vulcan had looked.

"Bones," he said pleadingly, "we must get him home quickly, to the Enterprise - look after him."

"I agree," said McCoy. "I can't wait to see what help he needs. But we must go cautiously. Just beaming him out could be dangerous."

"What shall we do?" asked Kirk, suddenly putting all his reliance on the shrewd doctor.

"Wait till he's alone, and then beam in with a medical kit," said McCoy firmly. "The right shot might give him enough strength to stand transportation."

He went off to Sickbay to gather together anything that might be required. Kirk set about getting the sensors and scanners organised. They reported a large crowd still in the audience room, and Spock and several others still on the platform; but after what seemed to Kirk an interminable wait, they began to record an exodus from the hall. They concentrated on the Vulcan trace.

"He's moving," reported a technician, his deft fingers adjusting to follow the trace. After a few more minutes he made the report Kirk was waiting for.

"He's back to the coordinates we first heard from," he said.

"Is he alone?" demanded Kirk.

"No, there's one other with him," said the man.

McCoy came back into the transporter room with his kit, and was brought up to date on the situation.

"I'm not waiting any longer," decided Kirk. "We can deal with one native."

McCoy agreed. He was both eager to see how Spock was, and aware that Kirk would not be able to contain his impatience much longer.

"All right," he said. "Let's go."

* * *

They materialised in Spock's room. Somi stared aghast as the two forms arrived, heralded by the same sparkle as had accompanied the disappearance of the intruders just a short while ago. For a moment the native cowered away fearfully, then he moved bravely to stand protectively in front of the Vulcan, who was propped up against the pillows in the large bed.

Kirk raised his phaser threateningly, but a gentle voice stopped him.

"Please don't hurt Somi - he doesn't deserve that."

Kirk lowered the weapon and looked past the native, his eyes searching the familiar face. He could see now that the Vulcan did indeed look ill.

In actual fact Spock was feeling very low. After the excited and awe-struck crowd had finally dispersed, he had allowed Somi to take him back to his room and help him into bed. As he had lain there thinking, his depression had increased. Physical fatigue after all the efforts he had made was taking its toll too.

He had felt a great relief when he had seen the landing party shimmer away safely, but now reaction was setting in and the feeling was being superseded by a wave of loneliness and desolation which he just could not control.

The phrase 'cruel fate' was very true, he thought. Just as he had resigned himself to his end here on this uncivilised world, fate had given him a tantalising glimpse of the life that had once been his. In his weakened state he found it very hard to cope with.

And now it was happening again!

He leaned back against the headboard wearily. He did not know if he had the strength to argue with his friends. They would want him to go back with them, he knew that, but he had already decided that for their own sakes he should not do so. Would they listen to him? Would they understand? That there was a large and vital omission in the logic of his self-arguments had not occurred to him.

Kirk advanced towards the bed, his feeling threatening to overwhelm him. Spock was alive! He could take him back home to the Enterprise, and care for him. They would be together again.

McCoy followed, taking out his medical scanner and pointing it towards the Vulcan. His lips tightened as he saw what it was registering. It was even worse than he had feared.

Kirk reached the bedside, sank down upon it, and clasped the Vulcan's unresisting hand. All the strain of the last month of doubt, anxiety and guilt was in his voice as he spoke.

"Oh Spock," he murmured, "I thought you were dead. I would never have left Varda if I'd known for sure you were still alive. But I had to go... orders... it was an emergency."

"I had surmised as much," replied Spock, and the tone of his voice reassured Kirk that the Vulcan held no grudge against him for deserting him.

"I'll make it up to you, Spock, I promise," said Kirk fondly, then his voice hardened. "And I'll give the authorities hell for making me do it."

"I fear it is too late for that," said Spock, and there was infinite weariness in his quiet voice.

"What do you mean?" demanded Kirk, a trace of fear sharpening his voice.

"I shall not be returning with you," said Spock quietly. "But Captain - you must alert the authorities. The Klingons have been investigating mineral deposits here - I do not know to what end."

Kirk ignored the second part of the remark, important though it was, as he protested about the first part.

"What do you mean, you aren't coming?" he said. "Whyever not?"

"It would be pointless, Captain," replied Spock, trying to find the words to explain his attitude. "I have little time left, and it would only distress you further - to no avail."

"Who says?" interrupted McCoy. "I know you've never trusted my abilities, but..."

"Doctor," said Spock wearily, "my injuries are severe, I know that - and my condition is deteriorating rapidly."

"Maybe," snapped McCoy, "but I might be able to do something about that."

Kirk interrupted the argument as he looked round the room. "Where's what's-is-name - Somi?" he asked. The native had taken advantage of their lack of attention to him, and had slipped away.

"That decides it," said Kirk sharply. "He'll be back with reinforcements in a minute." He glanced at the doctor, who was busy extracting a hypo from his kit. "Well, Bones, can he be moved?" he demanded.

"As soon as he's had this," replied the doctor, advancing upon Spock.

The Vulcan tried to ward him off, but McCoy took ruthless advantage of his lack of strength, pushing his arm way effortlessly and pressing the hypo to the thin shoulder. The Vulcan's words of protest died as the drug took effect, and he slumped limply against the pillows.

Kirk thumbed his communicator. "Three to beam up - as soon as you like, Scotty," he said. As he was speaking he was already on his feet and slipping his strong arms under the Vulcan's body to lift him from the bed.

When Somi, accompanied by several natives brandishing clubs, burst into the room a few moments later, it was desterted, and they could only stand gazing at the rumpled bed in perplexed astonishment, wondering what had become of their d'wari.

* * *

Scotty gazed anxiously at the party materialising on the platform of the transporter, and allowed himself a small grin of satisfaction as he recognised

first McCoy, and then Kirk, with a third form cradled carefully in his arms.

As soon as the materialisation was complete McCoy jumped from the platform to pull forward the waiting stretcher-trolley, brought by a team from Sickbay. He pushed back the cover on it, and turned to Kirk.

"Let me take care of him now, Jim," he said. "I'll need to do a thorough examination."

Almost reluctant to let go, Kirk laid the limp body on the stretcher and surrendered the Vulcan to the medical care anxious to tend him.

"Give me a report as soon as you can, Bones," he asked, "and I want to be there when he wakes up."

"You'd better be," replied McCoy, "or he'll be preferring charges against me for giving him a shot against his will."

Kirk managed a slight smile at McCoy's attempt to lighten his anxiety, but his face was soon serious again. He'd seen at close quarters how ill the Vulcan really looked, and the form he had carried aboard had seemed to thin and frail in his arms.

"He's not in good shape, is he, Bones?" he asked.

McCoy was honest. "No, he's not," he said. "I'm not sure how bad he is physically yet, but he seems to have given up mentally. I'll need your help to combat that."

"Whenever you need me, just call," said Kirk. "I'll be there as fast as I can move."

"I know," said McCoy, and gave Kirk's arm a sympathetic squeeze before he moved off to supervise his patient's progress to Sickbay.

There followed many hours of painstaking, detailed work, examining every inch of the Vulcan's extensive injuries. As he laboured on knowledge replaced speculation, and very gradually his spirits began to rise. It was bad, very bad, but not totally impossible. Several operations would be needed, and the success of each would depend on the extent of the recovery from the one before. It would be a difficult task and a very long one, with no guarantee of success, but it was a challenge he was going to accept and work at with every ounce of his skill and patience. For Spock, and for Jim.

Leaving his staff to settle the Vulcan into bed as comfortably as they could, he walked into his office, trying to put together the right words to communicate the situation to Kirk. To his surprise he found the Captain sitting quietly by his desk.

"I had to come down, Bones," Kirk apologised. "I couldn't wait, but I've kept out of the way. How is he?"

McCoy did not answer straight away. He reached into his special cupboard and fished out a drink for them both as he considered his reply.

"I'll not deceive you, Jim," he said at last. "His injuries are severe and extensive. He's paralysed from the waist down. There are several operations I can try as soon as I build up his strength a bit, but I can't guarantee success."

He paused for a while to let the significance of his words sink in. He could tell by the look on Jim's face that he was thinking the same black thoughts that had crossed his mind. What future was there for Spock if nothing could be done? There was no place on active service for someone in a wheelchair.

"Don't despair, Jim," said McCoy gently. "I'm really quite hopeful of the outcome. But most of all, I'm going to need your help and support to overcome his Vulcan stubbornness."

"What do you mean?" asked Kirk.

"Well, you see, he's got a fixed idea in his mind. He's become totally

resigned to the fact that nothing could help him, and that he was dying. It was true, too, on that uncivilised world! But somehow, whether he understands it or not, we've got to put hope back into him. We need the stamina of his Vulcan body, but even more we need his Vulcan mind working with us, thinking positively."

"Yes, I do understand, Bones," said Kirk, "and I'll do everything I can to help."

And he tried his hardest, in every way he knew. He was there at the Vulcan's bedside when Spock came round, and greeted him with an affectionate smile. But the Vulcan was very quiet and reserved, and the resigned expression did not leave his eyes.

"You should have left me there, Jim," he protested. "I did not wish to upset you further."

"Spock, shut up," said Kirk, gently but firmly. "Once I knew you were alive, there's no way I could leave you, and that's the end of the matter. Now, tell me about the Klingons."

He achieved his aim of temporarily distracting the Vulcan, who proceeded to tell him - in some detail - all he had learned about the visit of the Klingons, and the investigations that they had been making. Kirk made a mental note to pass the information on to the proper section as soon as he could.

Spock said no more about his forcible abduction from Varda, but as the days wore on McCoy began to be more and more worried about his mental attitude. He was excessively withdrawn and quiet, even with Jim, who visited him frequently and talked cheerfully about anything he could think of to catch his interest.

But the Vulcan continued to be unresponsive. He submitted uncomplainingly to their ministrations, which were almost continuous because of his physical helplessness. He patiently endured all the tests and checks that McCoy had to perform. He made an effort to eat what they gave him, for it seemed to matter so much to them, but his appetite was poor and he didn't gain strength as fast as McCoy had hoped.

And, what seemed even worse to the concerned doctor, he made no enquiries about his progress or his future prospects. It was as if he'd given up completely, and McCoy knew that somehow he had to rouse him from this lethargy, or he would have little chance of success with his operations.

He pondered over the problem through all his waking hours. Then one morning he suddenly had an idea. He thought it out as he washed and dressed, then he set off for Sickbay with a springier step and a brighter eye. Without giving detailed explanations to anyone he had the nurses on duty prepare the Vulcan, and with great care carried out a minor operation. He was very satisfied with his work, and had the Vulcan returned to the ward.

He then waited impatiently till the afternoon, when he planned to put the second part of his scheme into operation. He entered the small ward where the Vulcan was, and closed the door behind him to ensure privacy. He confronted his patient, who was sitting propped up against the pillows.

"Spock," he said bluntly, "I don't think you believe me when I say that I think the operations I'll do when you're a bit stronger will improve your condition a great deal."

The Vulcan looked at him impassively. "I don't believe in miracles, Doctor," he said flatly.

"I know you don't," agreed McCoy. "So, I'll make a bargain with you, Spock. If I can show you a minor miracle, will you believe me that a major one is possible?"

Spock's eyebrow rose in disbelieving fashion, but to the watching doctor even this flicker of interest was progress.

"Come on, Spock," urged McCoy. "Is it a bargain?"

"Very well, Doctor," Spock finally agreed.

With a satisfied smile McCoy went to the foot of the bed and untucked the covers over Spock's feet. "Now, Spock," he ordered, "wiggle your big toe for me."

Spock's expression showed his astonishment. "Doctor, you know I cannot," he said. "I have no feeling..."

McCoy interrupted his protests. "Try, Spock," he ordered, his brave smile hiding his inner trepidation. This had to work - it just had to.

Totally disbelieving, Spock nevertheless allowed the thought of the action to slip through his mind. To his utter amazement his big toe obeyed the thought and wiggled obligingly. He lifted his head from the pillow and stared as he deliberately repeated the action.

"See," crowed McCoy gleefully. "Now do you trust me?"

"I have always trusted you," said Spock slowly. Then, in a more hesitant tone than McCoy had ever heard him use before, he asked, "Bones, do you think I will walk again?"

"I'm sure you will," said McCoy confidently, secretly thrilled by the Vulcan's unconscious use of his nickname.

"Then I believe you," said Spock, and leaned back against his pillows, really relaxed for the first time since his return.

From then on he made excellent progress. His strength returned rapidly, and soon McCoy was able to do the first operation. It was an unqualified success. The others followed one by one. As the paralysis went, pain returned in full measure, but the Vulcan did not complain. Only McCoy suspected how much he suffered, and showed it in his constant care and attention. As the Vulcan improved, they reverted to their usual verbal fencing and repartee, but on the doctor's part there was a strong undercurrent of admiration and respect.

Kirk was a constant visitor, and was delighted with the Vulcan's good progress. He had gained a great deal of satisfaction from making his report to the Admiral. He had reported two things: first, that he had found Spock alive after all; and second, that the Klingons appeared to have been showing a great interest in Varda and its mineral deposits.

To give him his due, the Admiral had been unashamedly glad to hear his news about Spock, and had said nothing about Kirk's unauthorised diversion. He was more than interested in the news about the Klingons, and asked that Spock make a detailed report as soon as he was well enough.

By now the Enterprise had arrived at Merindo in time for the official ceremonies. These lasted for more than three weeks, and Kirk had to attend some function or another every day, while his ship hung in holding orbit round the planet. He was getting a bit tired of it all, but as he returned to the Enterprise each evening in time to visit Spock for a while and learn of his progress before he was settled for the night, he was content enough.

However, it did mean that he missed a special milestone. One morning, just after breakfast, one of the meals that the Vulcan was now doing justice to, McCoy came bustling into Spock's room.

"Now, lazybones," he said teasingly, "you've been lying about in that bed too long. Let's see about getting you on your feet."

The physiotherapist, who had spent long hours massaging the life back into Spock's legs, joined him, and together the two women helped the Vulcan to swing his long legs off the bed, lower his feet to the floor, and slowly stand up. He was very shaky, but determined, as they coaxed from him to two or three steps to reach a nearby chair. He sank into it, struggling to control his trembling, and disgusted with his own weakness, but the others were well pleased with his first efforts.

"That's a good start, Spock," said McCoy encouragingly. "A bit of practice and you'll soon improve. You'll be running marathons round the decks yet."

Knowing he was being teased, the Vulcan good-naturedly responded to the banter and made the required protest.

"What makes you imagine, Doctor, that I should undertake such an illogical exercise?" he said. Then he made a more serious plea. "Dr. McCoy," he begged, "Please will you not let anyone know that I am walking again, at least, not till I have more control of my movements? Not even Jim."

"All right, Spock," agreed McCoy with a mischievous look. "We'll keep it quiet and surprise him."

He enlisted the aid of the physiotherapist and several of his nurses, swearing them all to absolute secrecy. Between them they worked long hours through the following days with the seemingly indefatigable Vulcan, supporting him at first till his faltering steps became stronger, and then supervising his constant practicing so that he did not overtire himself. His determination to succeed came close to exhausting them all.

He was always safely back in his bed in good time for Kirk's evening visit, and although Kirk noticed and enjoyed the signs of his friend's improving health, he did not know the real cause of the Vulcan's air of satisfaction.

Then Kirk's daily visits to Merindo ended, and he returned to doing a full day's duty on the Bridge. He had just supervised their departure from orbit round the planet and given instructions for the course to be laid in for their next destination. There was little to do now, for the next little while, as the graceful Starship turned away from Merindo and made her way back towards the centre of the galaxy. He was idly watching the pattern of the stars on the viewscreen, and enjoying the calm after the busy days just over, when he heard the swish of the turbo-lift doors. As it wasn't near any duty shift changeover, he looked round to see who had come up to the Bridge, and stared in amazement.

Two figures in blue and black uniforms stood there. True, Dr. McCoy's hand was supportingly under the Vulcan's elbow, but he was there, and standing on his own two feet. Kirk could hardly believe his eyes, and his astonishment increased as Spock began to move forward, slowly, to be sure, and with none of his usual effortless grace, but quite definitely walking!

Temporarily stunned by the surprise, Kirk sat as if frozen. Then suddenly galvanised into action, he sprang from his seat and bounded up the steps, his face alight with happiness. This was mirrored in the faces of the Bridge crew, too, as a spontaneous cheer arose.

Kirk grabbed the Vulcan's other arm. "Spock, you're walking!" he crowed.

"Obviously," returned the Vulcan drily, but there was an answering glow in his dark eyes,

Very little work was done in the next half-hour as the Bridge crew rejoiced in their First Officer's recovery. Kirk helped him down the steps as if he were made of glass, and insisted that he sat down in the command chair. One by one the members of the Bridge crew left their posts for just a minute to shake Spock's hand and welcome him back. Uhura, carried away by the excitement, so far forgot herself as to lean forward and plant a quick kiss on the lean cheek, but nobody minded, not even the recipient. Kirk beamed from ear to ear, McCoy's grin was wide too, and even the impassive Vulcan had the hint of a smile at the corners of his mouth.

At last McCoy declared that his patient had had enough excitement for one day, and it was time he went back to Sickbay for a rest. Kirk escorted him up the steps and over to the turbo-lift doors, clutching the blue-clad arm as if he were loathe to let it go. Then he returned to his seat with a new bounce in his step. His world was fast getting back to normal, and he was very content.

But he had one more hurdle to surmount.

One evening, some weeks later, when Spock had been back on light duty for a few days, there came a knock at his door. He called, "Come!" and beamed a welcome as the familiar figure of his First Officer entered, carrying a tape in his hand.

"What can I do for you, Spock?" he smiled.

"It's the Ship's Log, sir," said Spock, indicating the tape in his hand. "I have been reviewing it, and there appears to be a discrepancy."

"Really? What's wrong?" asked Kirk, quite unsuspecting, having long ago forgotten many past events.

The Vulcan fixed him with an accusing eye. "I cannot find the record of your orders to return to Varda," he said.

"Oh, that," said Kirk, trying to avoid the Vulcan's gaze as he remembered. "Well... er... you see..."

"There was no order!" said Spock, suddenly understanding.

Kirk nodded, admitting it.

"Jim," murmured Spock, sinking into the chair opposite his Captain as if he'd had a sudden shock. His eyes widened as he realised the full implications of what he had just learned.

"You risked your career... and your life... for me?"

//Of course I did,// thought Kirk to himself, //and you'd do just the same for me, I know.// He smiled straight into the perplexed eyes, and answered simply, "Yes, and I'm very glad I did."

"Flouting regulations, Captain?" said Spock in mock reproof, but his eyes were shining too.

It had been quite a gamble, thought Kirk happily, but one that had paid off handsomely. Spock and he were together again, and their relationship was stronger than ever.

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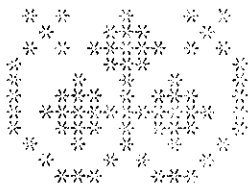
A REALISATION

by

Sharon O'Doherty

Many times we have fought our verbal battles -
 Once so hurtful, now the basis of our friendship.
 Things I know about you now flood my mind:
 Your concern for life; your sacrifices so that others
 may live and be well;
 Your total involvement on what is not a job, but a way of life,
 Without which, for you, there would be no life.
 I remember your concern for Jim, and even for me.
 In times when we needed you, you were always there.
 Now I see you lying there, and can do nothing to help.
 I feel anger against the Vians rising in me -
 It would be a triumph for you if you knew.
 Why did you go? I would have been stronger - but I know
 why. Your loyalty and all too Human heart ruled your head.
 I rest my hand on your forehead and feel the heat of your pain.
 Tears well up in me; you open your eyes and look into my heart.
 I look into yours, and see there a reflection of my love
 for you - my friend.

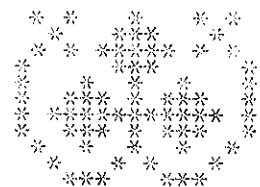
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SOLE DUTY

by

Carol Davidson



Captain James T. Kirk of the USS Enterprise was taking a shower in a vain attempt to get rid of the clinging tendrils of a disturbed and restless sleep. He felt LOUSY. Not even the effects of an ice-cold shower (albeit lasting only a few seconds) could shake off the numbness in his body and the fuzziness in his brain.

The Enterprise was currently involved in completing a seismological survey of the Class M planet Bel-Ami 2. It was hoped that the results of the survey would enable the Federation to set up a colony of scientists and agricultural experts on the planet's surface to try to turn the whole planet into one giant wheat field. This was to be the first of many such steps to be taken by the Federation to combat the ever-increasing demand for food by the peoples of the U.F.P.

Yet, as exciting as the prospects would no doubt be if the survey and the colony were successful, Jim Kirk was forced to admit that he was BORED. Boredom always affected his sleeping patterns, for he could also feel the listlessness filtering through from his crew - and that worried him. An unhappy ship often meant that there was a distinct lack of discipline, even on the Bridge.

Stepping out of the shower, Kirk glanced at the chronometer by his bed and realised that he was due on the Bridge in just half an hour. Nevertheless, determined not to miss breakfast, he hurriedly got dressed and made the best possible speed towards the synthesiser in the living area of his quarters. He punched some buttons and waited for the signal to say that his breakfast was ready. Bacon, eggs, sausage, tomato, black pudding and black coffee - not forgetting stacks of hot buttered toast.

Taking the laden food tray over to the table (munching a slice of toast en route) he absently thought of what Bones had said to him the other day. '... either you agree to diet, or I'll strap you down in Sickbay and let you starve until you lose 20 pounds.'

Kirk knew that Bones wasn't kidding, either. Nonetheless, he shrugged off his guilty conscience in favour of his rumbling tummy, and declared to his slice of toast, "Well, if I'm going to be a pig, I might as well go the whole hog!" He chuckled at his amazing wit and resolved to try it out on his First Officer. He laughed again, and almost choked to death on a piece of bacon. "Poetic justice?" muttered Kirk, and thought of a smiling-faced Dr. McCoy.

Captain Kirk was exactly on time as he stepped out of the turbolift and onto the Bridge. He nodded to his Communications Officer, Uhura, and she returned the greeting with a friendly smile - a smile, thought Kirk, that could knock any unsuspecting male off his feet at 30 paces.

He made his way to the conn. "Status report, Mr. Spock?"

There was no reply. Puzzled, Kirk looked to his right towards his First Officer's usual abode, the science console. It was Ensign Pavel Chekov who met the gaze of his Captain's eyes.

"Sair, Mr. Spock has not yet reported for duty. I stayed on here just in case, Sair."

The Captain nodded in response to Chekov's report, but his mind was on other matters - what was wrong with Spock?

The formalities over, Kirk buzzed Spock's quarters and was answered by a very strained voice.

"Would it be possible for you to come to my quarters immediately, Captain? It is somewhat difficult to talk at this moment."

The Vulcan had barely finished speaking when Kirk jumped to his feet, ordered a bewildered Chekov to take the Conn, and raced for the main turbo-lift.

By the time Kirk reached Spock's quarters, many thoughts had gone through his mind. Had something gone wrong with the survey? Or was it of a more personal nature - PON FARR?

When the door opened, the sight that met Kirk's eyes stunned him completely. It seemed like hours before he could actually move or speak.

Spock's eyebrows rose in the way they often did, and Kirk let out the greatest whoop of delight ever - at least as great as when he first beat Spock at 3-dimensional chess.

"I fail to see why you regard this predicament in such a light, Captain. Humour is a difficult concept to understand." The Vulcan fought for some kind of control, but was completely unsuccessful.

Fifteen minutes later Captain James T. Kirk, accompanied by his First Officer Mr. Spock, arrived on the Enterprise Bridge. Kirk sat heavily down into his command chair; his brow beaded with sweat from trying not to laugh too much. Besides, his sides hurt...

What would Bones say? Would he ever be believed?

//Well,// thought Kirk, //it isn't every day that a cool, logical Vulcan puts his feet into the wrong boots and can't get the damned things back off!!!//

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"LAUNCH SHUTTLECRAFT"

(Inspired by the view from the hangar deck in 'The Galileo Seven'.)

The blackness floods its magnificence,
The vastness numbs the mind,
Yet fills the soul with eloquent harmonies,
A completeness which dissolves
The myth of insignificance
And congeals into a crystal clarity
Of Oneness,
Suspected, awaited, till now undefined.
An ecstasy pervading,
Swollen senses extending to infinities
Of exultation, which in their purity,
Escape the mortal grasp
Of their straining shell
To disperse
Amidst the towering, rarefied
Summits of consciousness,
Mocking the feeble tremblings.
He who seeks to contain this torrent of divinity
Tumbled down into straitened confines
Of sanity.
Then, constricted breath, intoxicated eye,
Resolve into calmer Humanity,
Hold fast to the anchor of duty
Whilst they seek the gods
In splendid arrogance.

Linda Spencer

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A STRANGE KIND OF LONELINESS

by

Vicki Richards

The blue-grey planet looked innocuous enough, turning slowly on the main Bridge viewscreen. The sensors said Class M, information which sent a ripple of interest - and indeed excitement - through most sections of the Enterprise. Despite the years of space explorations it was still a big, largely unknown galaxy, and unexplored worlds capable of supporting humanoid life without too much engineering of their environment being necessary didn't turn up often enough to take the thrill out of the prospect of exploring them. In fact, the senior officers were already privately wondering which of them the Captain would choose to assign to the first landing party.

James T. Kirk sat in his command chair and thought, not at all impervious to the air of suppressed excitement about him. 'To explore strange new worlds' was, after all, a good part of what it was all about - apart from a million other things as well. The initial disappointment at the sensor report that there was no life on the planet - at least, no sentient life - had quickly been replaced by interest at Spock's announcement that there appeared to be the remains of a fairly advanced civilisation just below the surface of the planet. Of course, it meant that something must have happened to make them all leave - Kirk hoped they had only left, but it didn't seem too likely - and the landing parties would have to go very carefully at first until they discovered what it was that had made them leave, or otherwise disappear. And James Kirk had every intention of being on that first landing party, no matter what his First Officer might say.

"Looks harmless enough, but that probably means just the opposite, if I know anything," said a familiar voice behind him.

"Does that mean you won't be wanting to come on the landing party, Bones?" said Kirk in an amused tone to the blue-clad figure behind him. He knew only too well that no matter what Bones said about transporters and new planets, he was every bit as excited as the rest of them.

"I didn't say that, Jim," came the reply. Kirk didn't have to turn to know that his friend was grinning. They had known each other long enough to realise when a bit of leg-pulling was going on. "I dare say I ought to go along - you'll be needing someone to keep an eye on you."

"Come on, Bones - you sound like Spock! Anyway, who said I was going on the first landing party?"

"Huh!"

"What do you mean - 'Huh!'?"

"Doctor McCoy means," said the Vulcan, crossing over from the science station to take his usual position at the other side of Kirk's chair to where McCoy was standing, "that your curiosity will be such that you will be unable to refrain from accompanying the first landing party, as is customary."

"Customary?" Kirk really was amused.

"I can recall very few occasions when you have not assigned yourself to the first landing party on an unexplored Class M planet with such possibilities, despite warnings as to the dangers inherent in such missions."

"Do you know, you two really are beginning to sound like each other!" said Kirk, taking obvious delight at the looks of disgust immediately appearing on the faces of his two friends. He also noticed a grin spreading on the face of his Chief Communications Officer; he wasn't the only one to find amusement in his two friends' permanent battle of words and wit, though Spock at least would deny the 'wit' part most vigorously. Or would he? They had all come a long way since those early years on the Enterprise.

"Well, just to prove you both right," Kirk announced good-naturedly, "I do

intend to be on the first landing party. And I'm taking you two along. Not so that you can nursemaid me, but so that I can keep an eye on you." He snapped on a switch in his chair console, deliberately avoiding Spock's look of careful indifference. He found Bones' expression of gleeful triumph easier for keeping his face straight; Spock's attitude had him in danger of breaking up, and a Starship Captain did have to maintain some decorum.

"Captain's Log, Supplemental." Kirk spoke into the recorder. "We are now in parking orbit around the unexplored Class M planet we have marked on the charts as M7-2649A. The sensors record no sign of sentient life, but Mr. Spock has discovered traces of a previous civilisation just below the surface of the planet. Therefore I intend sending down a landing party to explore immediately. The landing party will consist of: myself; First Officer Spock; Dr. McCoy; Mr. Chekov; our Communications Officer; and a Security guard."

Kirk wasn't looking at Uhura, and Chekov wasn't on the Bridge at the time, but he could sense his lieutenant's pleasure at his announcement. As far as he could remember Uhura hadn't had a planetfall in quite a while. He was glad she was pleased; she was a good officer, and she deserved it.

"I think," said McCoy thoughtfully, "that I'll go and get my medikit. You know my feelings about harmless-looking planets. I'd better be prepared; the place is probably crawling with poisonous lizards or lurking bacteria!"

Kirk and Spock watched him go without speaking. They both knew that the next time their friend moved off the Enterprise without his precious medikit, it would be the first.

* * *

The landing party materialised in an underground chamber, phasers at the ready. Kirk knew that the sensors had detected no signs of sentient life, but he had been in too many situations which justified Bones' words about 'harmless-looking planets' to take any chances.

Scotty had put them down in the middle of a dark chamber Spock's sensors had detected through the surface rock. The sensors had also said that there was nothing at all harmful on the surface of the planet, but Kirk had decided that beaming down underground would save time; it was the underground installations they were interested in - later parties could explore the surface. At least Bones' mutterings about 'lurking bacteria' seemed to be unfounded; the doctor had to admit that sensors had their uses.

Spock switched on a hand-held light and began to search for a light switch. It was illogical to assume that the civilisation that had built the underground installations could have lived without light. Sure enough, it took him only a few seconds to locate what he was looking for, and the chamber was flooded with light so brilliantly white that they all had to shade their eyes for a few moments till they could get used to it.

Spock recovered first. He stood and pointed his tricorder at everything in sight, and muttered one word. "Fascinating."

Even McCoy could not disagree with that statement; it was fascinating.

They stood in the centre of a large chamber, whose walls were lined with bank upon bank of what could only be alien computers and their attendant circuitry. They had all seen computers before, of course; Spock especially had been surrounded by them every day of his life. But even Spock had never seen anything quite like the sight in front of their eyes; whoever had built the underground complex must have had a technological knowledge far in advance of anything the Federation possessed at the moment - though if Kirk knew anything of his Vulcan friend, it would not be long now before they did possess that knowledge.

"Fascinating," Spock repeated, and walked over to the nearest row of strange machines, to begin immediately fathoming their various uses.

The other members of the landing party then recovered from their momentary

stupor at the magnificence of the sight they had been greeted with, and walked over to join him. All of them stood and looked at the various panels, symbols and relays, all trying to work out what everything was for, and to detect any similarities to the Enterprise's own main computer. Chekov was particularly interested, but he and the others knew full well it would be Spock who knew exactly what their function was before anyone else did.

None of them were so foolish as to experiment by touching any switches, of course, even if after a few minutes examination they did have a good idea of what several of the panels were for; they had all had trouble with computers that didn't do what they were supposed to before.

Chekov, however, suddenly realised that he had managed to decipher a row of alien symbols; that particular machine surely controlled the flow of air in the chamber. His curiosity was aroused to such an extent that he leaned forward to examine more closely a smaller row of figures underneath the first ones. In doing so he inadvertently touched the side of the computer, and was immediately thrown backwards several feet, to land in a crumpled heap on the floor of the chamber with a surprised gasp.

"What was that!" he gasped as the other members of the landing party reached him. A concerned McCoy already had his scanner out.

"Something's similar to an ordinary electric sock," replied Spock calmly; he could see that Chekov had suffered no permanent damage, even though Dr. McCoy continued to examine him. "It is the computer's self-defence system; it was merely responding to its programming. In a few moments I will have deduced the method for ensuring that the computers are safe to touch." He didn't add that Chekov ought to have known better; he didn't need to - the young Russian already looked sheepish enough.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Spock," said Chekov as he got to his feet, McCoy having pronounced that he would live, "but I thought I had worked out that that relay controlled the air in here."

"You are correct, Mr. Chekov," replied Spock, turning as he did so to carefully press several switches on the very same computer bank that had mistreated Chekov. "All the computers in this chamber appear to control the subterranean environment, and all life-support systems. Judging from their complexity, I estimate that this underground complex must have an area of some 253.89 square miles."

"What? That's impossible, Spock," said Kirk. "Our sensors didn't register a complex of that size!"

"Nevertheless, my calculations are correct, Captain," Spock replied evenly. Kirk didn't doubt him.

"Are you saying that the Enterprise's sensors aren't working properly, Spock?" McCoy was looking decidedly uncomfortable; he just didn't feel happy in the presence of all these computers.

"No, Doctor - the ship's sensors were functioning correctly when we left. The only possible answer is that somewhere in this complex is what might be termed a 'jamming device' which is preventing the sensors from fully scanning the area. These computers do appear to have a great many defence mechanisms incorporated into their design."

"Jamming device?" said Kirk concernedly. "I don't like the sound of that!" He took out his communicator and flipped it open, almost as if he didn't expect it to work.

"Kirk to Enterprise." The other members of the landing party watched intently.

"Enterprise to Captain Kirk - Scotty here," came the almost immediate response. The sighs of relief in the chamber were audible. "I was just about to call you, Captain."

"What is it, Scotty? Something wrong with the ship?"

"I don't rightly know, sir." Montgomery Scott's voice showed his worry even over the communicator. "But just a few minutes ago the transporter room reported that all the transporters have suddenly gone dead - no reason, they just went inoperative. I've got a team working on them, but for the moment I'm afraid we canna beam ye back up, Captain."

"I was afraid of something like that, Scotty," Kirk replied tiredly. "Spock thinks there's a jamming device of some sort down here which stopped the ship's sensors probing this area thoroughly - this complex is far larger than we thought, and packed with alien computers of a totally new design. Perhaps the jamming device is what's affecting the transporters as well. We'll try and locate it and turn it off."

"Aye, Captain, good idea," said the Enterprise's Chief Engineer and acting commander. "I'd like a look at that place myself."

"As soon as we've located that device and finished this survey, you can come down here and look at these machines all you like, Scotty. We'll contact you again when we've located the jammer. Kirk out."

Kirk put his communicator away and suppressed a sigh. He had a feeling that Bones' words about 'harmless-looking planets' might just be going to prove themselves right. He wished that just this once his friend's premonitions would be wrong.

"We'd better beging to explore this place properly." Kirk looked at Spock, who was reading information from his tricorder. "Any suggestions as to which direction we try first, Spock?"

"Yes, Captain," replied the Vulcan. "Now we are down here, the tricorder does not appear to be affected by whatever affected the ship's sensors..."

"Thank heavens for small mercies!" interrupted McCoy.

"... and indicates a source of power emanating from the south-west."

"Then we'd better try that way," said Kirk. "And as quickly as possible, before anything else is affected."

They moved off after Spock towards the end of the huge chamber, and Kirk found himself thinking that it felt almost as if, now they had come down to the planet, something was trying to make them stay down there. He had nothing to go on, of course, except the strange occurrence of the transporter's inexplicable malfunction, and a vague feeling of unease; but one thing his years of space travel had taught him was to expect the unexpected.

The chamber was vast, but not as vast as it had at first seemed; it was as if the builders had deliberately incorporated a subtle optical illusion into the design to give the impression of extra space. That was one of the first concerns in the architecture of underground cities, of course, especially for species with characteristics similar to Terrans. It was one of the abilities which went to make the best spacecraft designers. And it did prove one thing; whoever had built the underground installations, they had originated on the surface of the planet. More and more, Kirk wond ed what catastrophe - for catastrophe it must have been - had made them move to beneath the surface.

They reached the end of the cavern, and came to an opening leading onto a white-painted corridor, still clean and white after its years of apparent desertion. McCoy confided to Uhura that he was very glad no banks of computers were stuffed into the corridor as well; he had begun to feel that the machines were watching him. Uhura quietly admitted that she had been experiencing something of the same feeling.

"This corridor appears to lead in the direction the tricorder indicates we should follow," announced Spock solemnly, "and I am still getting a complete absence of life-form readings. This complex is completely deserted."

"Well, it doesn't feel deserted," McCoy spoke up as they all walked out of the chamber and into the corridor, unable to keep quiet about his feelings any longer. "Call me a fool, if you like, but I'm sure that something was watching me back there, even if only over a video circuit."

Spock stopped and looked at him thoughtfully, but he didn't call him anything. He knew the doctor's warning had no basis in logic, but he took note of it. There were some things that Humans seemed to be able to sense without knowledge, and over the years Spock had had enough evidence to make him take any warnings of McCoy's seriously, even if he never admitted the fact to the surgeon.

But McCoy had hardly spoken the words before they were all made very aware of the fact that, life-forms or no, something was very much aware of their presence. Without warning a heavy metal door slid down from the ceiling and closed across the entrance between the chamber and the corridor. The first knowledge they had of it was the dull thud as it closed. They all whirled round, not completely surprised; it was almost as if they had been expecting something like it. Kirk certainly had been.

Phil Peters, the Security guard, went to examine the door; Chekov joined him. But a quick tricorder scan had already given Spock the information that they would be unable either to open the door with the equipment they had, or blast through it with their phasers. Chekov and Peters soon came to the same conclusion.

"It looks like we have no choice but to go on," said Kirk resignedly. "We probably just tripped another security system. All the same, keep a look out, and have your phasers at the ready - we can't know what other little devices the people who built this complex designed into it."

They continued to walk warily along the corridor; soon they came to an intersection, and Spock indicated that they should take the left-hand corridor. They duly stepped into it, and had gone no further than ten yards along it when blue bolts of fire from an unseen weapon in the corridor wall streaked out and struck down Peters and Chekov. They continued to fire, accompanied by a high-pitched screaming noise, until the rest of the landing party could drag them clear.

"Chekov's okay," McCoy reported as he left the young Russian, his rapid first-aid completed. "Superficial burns to the arms and hands only. Peters is much worse. He'll live, but he mustn't be moved far - the injuries to his chest are too serious. Spock, can't you turn that thing off so we can find somewhere he can be put to lie down?"

"Indeed, Doctor, I believe I can," replied the Vulcan. Spock went back along the corridor several paces, felt along the wall, and located a concealed control panel of some sort. After several moments he made some alterations to its circuitry, then returned to where the others were gathered around the fallen Security guard.

"It should now be safe to proceed along the corridor," Spock announced. "It appears that the tricorder is not functioning at 100% efficiency, or I should have had warning of those energy beams. From now on we must proceed with extra caution."

McCoy looked quickly at him. He had been going to say something about their needing extra caution before, but he didn't. Spock knew McCoy well enough by now to understand that his concern for Peters and Chekov was what caused him to appear short-tempered; without a word he went to help McCoy carefully lift the injured Security guard.

It might have been better for Peters' health if they had been able to stay where they were, but none of them would be able to return to the Enterprise until they could find and turn off whatever jamming device was affecting the ship's transporters. McCoy felt it would be safer if they could find a room

somewhere in the complex where he could stay with Peters, than to leave him in the corridor where anything could turn up to attack them; McCoy still couldn't get rid of the feeling that he was being watched.

Shortly they did come to some small rooms which looked as though they had once been offices. Cautiously Kirk entered one, and after a few moments decided it was safe. Spock and McCoy carried Peters in, and carefully laid him on a cleared desk top.

"I'll stay here with him now, Jim," said McCoy, his scanner out as he gave Peters another check. "You go on and find that jammer, then come back for us. And hurry up about it."

"Right, Bones. What about Chekov?"

"I am all right, Captain," Chekov interrupted.

"He is, actually," McCoy confirmed. "The pain-killer I gave him will last for a couple of hours at least. He's probably better off going with you anyway, and you might need him."

"Right, Bones. We'll go on ahead, then," decided Kirk, "although I don't like the idea of us being split up, especially after the things that have happened. But before we go anywhere, I'm going to inform Scotty of the situation."

Kirk flipped his communicator open, but his attempt to contact the Enterprise was completely in vain. He frowned and attempted to eliminate the static that came from it, but there was nothing. They were out of contact with the ship.

"Damn!" said Kirk with feeling. "I might have expected that!"

"A logical progression, Captain," Spock pointed out helpfully. "It would appear that an attempt is being made to cut us off from the ship."

"We can see that, Spock," McCoy couldn't help himself. "I thought you said that there were no life-forms in this place. Or is it the computers that are keeping us prisoner?"

"That is possible, Doctor, as you well know," Spock replied thoughtfully, "though there is always the possibility that the tricorder malfunction extends to the detection of life-forms."

"You hear what he said, Bones," grinned Kirk wryly, "so be careful while we're gone - keep that phaser within reach, and don't touch anything that looks like a computer!"

"You don't have to tell me that!" retorted the doctor. "I'd rather have a whole load of bug-eyed monsters trying to keep us prisoner than any overgrown relations of M5."

* * *

Kirk, Spock, Uhura and Chekov progressed slowly through the underground complex, keeping a wary eye out for the next trap set for them, for by now they were becoming more and more certain that they were traps, and any fate awaiting trespassers was not likely to be pleasant. A short while after they left McCoy and Peters, Kirk made a check to see if they could still communicate with each other. They could; McCoy's tones came over the communicator clearly, urging them to hurry up; but Uhura warned that anything capable of putting the ship's transporters out of action, and of causing malfunctions of the sensors, the tricorder and communicators, was also quite capable of denying them that capacity whenever it decided the action was prudent.

"This complex is indeed large," said Spock as they carefully rounded yet another corner. "There has to be a means of rapid transport." He indicated two doors set into the corridor wall, with what looked like a control panel to one side.

"A turbolift?" Kirk went up and looked at the panel suspiciously. It

could easily be another computer-set trap.

"I believe so, Captain," replied Spock, and keyed a sequence into the panel before anyone could say anything. The doors slid slowly open, to reveal what could only be an alien design of turbolift.

"Spock - wasn't that a bit risky?" Kirk scolded as they all stepped inside.

"No, Captain," came the reply. "I have now translated the alien symbols we have found here; I merely read what it said on the control panel."

"But it could still have been a trap," Kirk insisted, yet knowing full well that Spock would have an explanation.

He did. "I believe we are now past what might be called the perimeter defences, Captain; the energy bolts that struck Mr. Chekov and Mr. Peters were the last defence against infiltration of the complex. We are now truly inside. Have you not noticed the living quarters we passed? I have formulated the theory that now we have progressed this far, the computers have accepted that we are inside. We have only progressed this far without serious injury, except in the case of our Security guard, because we have taken the necessary precautions. Had we attempted to interfere with any of the computers, however, without first acquiring the knowledge to render them harmless, the results would have been quite different."

"Even if we are past the outer defences, Mr. Spock," said Uhura as the First Officer pressed a button and the turbolift began to move, "the computers could still harm us in one way, if they decided they weren't satisfied with just keeping us prisoner."

"Indeed, Lieutenant," replied the Vulcan calmly. "They could cut off life-support."

"I was trying not to think about that, Spock," said Kirk. "But supposing that the computers have let us past, that your theory is right - it's still obvious that they have no intention of letting us out of here if they can help it. Why? And will they be content to allow us to roam around their complex unhindered, or are they going to try and put us into closer captivity?"

"Captain, as yet I am unable to answer your question. A considered reply requires further data."

The turbolift sped on, more silently than the Enterprise's, but equally as fast, with its occupants thinking about the Vulcan's carefully-worded 'don't know'. It wasn't often Spock was at a loss for an answer.

The lift slowed finally to a halt and the doors opened. Cautiously they all stepped out, to find themselves in the middle of what had clearly been the living quarters of the complex. What Spock had seen before must surely have been the living quarters of people working in the area near to where they had left McCoy, for here was unmistakably the place where the former inhabitants of the complex had spent most of their leisure time. They walked through recreation areas, saw all the signs of domestic habitation, though obviously alien in style, from living quarters to places of amusement; but of the former inhabitants they saw no sign at all. Nor did they see any sign of the former hostility shown to them by the ever-vigilant electronic guardians.

"I don't like it," Uhura announced, breaking the silence which seemed to have settled on them. "I still have the feeling that I'm being watched, which I probably am. Those computers are still observing us. And this place is... creepy, somehow. What happened to them all, all the people who must have lived here? Whatever it was, how do we know that whatever made them leave, or disappear, isn't still around?"

"We don't know, Lieutenant," replied Kirk. "It could have been anything - a disease is most likely. Or an unexplained mass exodus. Either way, the sooner we can find what we're looking for and get back to the ship, the better."

Spock led them on. Kirk knew from experience when his Vulcan friend knew

what he was looking for - which was usually. Soon he found it - another turbolift, one which hopefully would lead them finally to the control centre of the complex, where the device preventing the operation of the Enterprise transporters must surely be situated.

This time no-one commented as Spock punched a sequence into the control panel; the turbolift, however, did not perform as smoothly as the other one had - it started off with quite a lurch, then sped away at a speed which made it fairly difficult for them to retain their equilibrium, as accustomed as they were to that form of transport.

The turbolift changed direction with yet another lurch, this time causing them to slide into the wall. Chekov was unable to prevent himself from falling, and landed on the floor with a distinct gasp. Spock carefully helped the Navigator to his feet, making sure he didn't touch his arms or hands too roughly. Kirk had rather suspected that the pain-killers weren't working as well as they might; Chekov had been far too silent for too long.

"What's going on, Spock?" Kirk demanded as the turbolift gave yet another violent lurch. "I thought you said you'd figured out how to work these things!"

"What I have learned has indeed enabled me to operate the turbolifts," Spock explained calmly, holding the Captain up as the lift changed direction rather erratically once more, "and indeed the lift has no choice but to deliver us to the destination I programmed into its control circuits. However, it appears that it retains the ability to make the journey uncomfortable."

"I don't like that," Chekov finally broke his unusual silence. "You make it sound as if it's alive, Mr. Spock!"

Any further comments were prevented by the turbolift finally arriving at its destination and practically spilling them out into the corridor. Having deposited them, the lift immediately closed its doors and sped away again. They wouldn't be going back that way.

"I think it is alive!" said Uhura rather crossly as she picked herself up from the floor, helping the fallen Pavel to his feet as she did so. Chekov was beginning to get rather fed up with finding himself unexpectedly on the floor; his injuries were beginning to hurt a lot more.

"I think we're lucky it didn't do anything else to us," said Kirk grimly as he stood up. "We can all thank Mr. Spock for that. Spock - now why do you think the first turbolift carried us without any trouble, and this one has been so temperamental?" He asked the question like a man who already has a good idea of the answer.

"It would seem, Captain," replied the Vulcan as he recalibrated his tricorder, "that the computers controlling this complex, having finally allowed us past their outer defences, actually wanted us to reach the living quarters. They did not want us to reach this part of the complex."

"If that's so," put in Uhura, "why did they attack us at first? What suddenly made them accept us? And does that mean that we've got to start looking out for nasty surprises again?"

"Lieutenant," said Kirk, "we never stopped looking out for those."

But nothing did seem to be waiting for them as they made their way further into the heart of the complex. No more deadly energy beams or worse hazards were there to block their path. It was as Spock had said; those defences seemed to have applied only to the outer perimeters only - now they really were in the centre of the complex nothing, except the turbolift's unexpected bad behaviour gave them any cause to think that the controlling computers didn't want them there.

Uhura, however, was still not entirely convinced that no life-forms were in the complex; Mr. Spock had said that the tricorder wasn't operating with its usual efficiency, after all. She could feel something watching them, as Dr.

McCoy had said he felt before, if not with hostility, then with a certain amount of disapproval.

Then finally they came to the place they had been searching for all along. The corridor ended on a high platform overlooking what could only be the central nexus of the computers; below them in a vast chamber, far larger than the one they had first beamed down to, were what appeared to be hundreds of intricately designed machines. The look of awe on Spock's face was enough to tell them that the sight was in actuality what he expected it to be.

An impossibly fragile-looking spiral staircase led them down from the platform to the floor of the chamber. The nearer they got to the computers, the more all of them were filled with a great sense of awe at a people who could build such a massive array of mechanical brains, all blinking and flashing and clicking away with a life of their own.

But Kirk knew now that it would only be a matter of time before he would stand on the Bridge of his ship again; no computer, however alien, was totally strange to Spock - he had no doubt of his friend's ability to set them free soon from their subterranean prison.

None of them knew then that the robot brains they watched had already surmised what their intention was; as soon as Kirk, the first person off the staircase, set foot on the floor of the chamber, as if he had touched a hidden switch all the life-support systems in the complex failed.

* * *

The instant that the lights dimmed McCoy knew what had happened. He had served on Starships too long, had been in the same situation too many times before, not to know what the sudden absence of all normal background noise meant. Normal for any artificially-assisted environment, that was.

The faint emergency lighting coming on paradoxically woke the fitfully sleeping Peters. The painkillers McCoy had given him were wearing off, and he didn't want to give him too heavy a dose if he could help it.

"What is it?" gasped the wounded Security guard, totally unable to get anything else out for the pain speaking caused him.

"Life-support going off," McCoy replied grimly; he had recognised Peters as a man who would rather know the truth, whatever it was. "And I don't know how long we have, before you ask." He switched off the scanner he was running over Peters and reached in his bag for the hypospray; he was going to have to use that painkiller whether he wanted to or not. But Peters found the strength from somewhere to grab his arm weakly and stop him, at least until he could get another question out.

"The Captain and Mr. Spock - how long have they been gone?"

"Quite a while," replied the doctor. "Long enough to have reached wherever it is Spock's trying to get to. One thing this could mean - those computers have switched off life-support because they've figured that Jim and Spock are getting too close to beating them."

Peters appeared to accept McCoy's guess, for he closed his eyes and sighed. Or maybe he just wanted to believe it. Either way, he allowed McCoy to administer the sedative, and within the space of a few seconds was in a drug-induced sleep again, leaving the Medical Officer of the Enterprise alone to worry over him, and over his friends who were even then trying desperately to save them all somewhere in that vast underground warren. McCoy knew they would be trying, wherever they were; of himself, the good doctor thought hardly at all.

The outlook was certainly black - black as the complex would be when even the dim emergency lighting finally failed - yet McCoy had faith; faith in Jim not to give up, but even more faith in the Vulcan to find an answer, no matter what his public comments on Spock's ability might be. Spock knew that. McCoy had lost count of the times when that brain of his - and even his logic - had

pulled them out of situations where everything seemed lost. He couldn't believe that this time Spock might fail; that thought at least was something to hold on to.

* * *

In another part of the complex James Kirk was thinking much the same thoughts as he watched the Vulcan struggle to work in the near-darkness. It was clear that the computers did not want them there, so surely they must be in the right place. Spock hadn't said what exactly he was trying to do, but he was definitely working with some purpose, even if he hadn't located the jamming device yet. At least he seemed to have found out how to work on the things without them retaliating. One thing he couldn't do, of course, was to restore life-support; the circuits controlling that particular function were in the chamber they had first beamed down to, and were unreachable. Kirk wondered how McCoy and Peters were faring; now he couldn't even contact them. The computers had apparently decided to deny them even that.

Uhura and Chekov also stood silently watching as Spock worked, searching for some answer to their predicament. Spock knew they were relying on him, expecting him to master the alien machines and save them all; he hoped he wouldn't fail them.

He quickly put thoughts of possible failure from his mind. So Human a trait was dangerous in such a situation. He had found where the jammer was located, but was totally unable to break through the programmed defences to reach it. Somehow he had to convince the computers to allow him to reach it; but how? He had to have more data.

Then he found what he was looking for. He pressed several more switches, then suddenly the control panel he had been working on emitted a piercing bleeping noise. Spock turned round to watch.

Six feet in front of the panel a shape was forming, as if out of thin air. Kirk, Chekov and Uhura spun round in surprise, if not apprehension. They all had their phasers out. Spock, naturally, showed no expression other than interest - but then he had been expecting it.

As the shape of an alien humanoid took form before them, the three Humans didn't need Spock to tell them that what they were watching was a holographic recording, which the Science Officer had managed to release from a data storage bank.

She was at least six feet tall, and beautiful in a strange way, with pale blue skin which might once have been almost the same shade as an Andorian's, had not centuries of living deep underground gradually taken the brightness of hue from the skin of her ancestors.

After their initial surprise had gone they watched in total fascination as the glowing holographic projection took shape in the dim light. They all knew what they were watching - a recording left behind by the people of the world they were trapped in, left behind for anyone who might come after them. When she began to speak in a low, melodious voice none of them was surprised that they could easily understand what she was saying; they had already seen enough of the scientific expertise of her ancestors to suppose that the computers would have the ability to translate automatically.

She spoke of a people resigned to their fate, who knew they were dying out and couldn't do anything about it. The quiet sadness in her low, dead voice as she spoke touched Kirk deeply; how terrible for a race so advanced as hers had clearly been to be trapped in such a situation. Then he remembered they were also trapped.

The story she told was of a people who, when they had reached a high level of technological advancement, discovered a vast source of natural energy below the surface of their planet. When severe climactic conditions which prevailed for almost half a century caused them almost insurmountable problems, they took

the decision to move underground and take advantage of that natural energy source. So over a period of years the complex was built, and life left the surface of the planet. They called their underground world - she spoke an alien word which translated itself to Kirk as 'The Labyrinth' - and at first it seemed the paradise of technological brilliance they had wanted it to be.

Several centuries had passed in peace before they noticed that something was happening; fewer children were being born, and people weren't living as long as they should, despite their high level of medical knowledge. When the holograph gave the final explanation, when she told them how, only after years of decline, when it was too late for them to do anything about it, they had found the reason, Kirk felt it touch a chord in his own soul. He knew his companions felt it too.

The people of the labyrinth had not developed in the way they should have, the sad alien explained. Instead of reaching outward for the stars, instead of finding their brothers and sisters on other worlds, and growing as a people should into something better, they had chosen to shut themselves in their own small world, putting all their resources into the enclosed underground labyrinth.

But it was enclosed, then there they could only grow so far. They became stunted mentally, halted in their development as a race, and eventually began to die of nothing more than a lack of stimulation. Life in the labyrinth was always the same, for everyone; everyone knew what his life would be, what would happen; nothing new, nothing to try for, to strive for. In the end they all died of a strange wasting disease, not contagious or infectious, but brought on by nothing more than centuries of boredom. They had wasted their potential and had paid for it with the extinction of their race. With the final explanation the holograph bade them a last, sad farewell, and faded.

"I know," said Kirk after several moments of deep silence, "that there are some races, Humans being one, who need stimulation and challenge to function properly. But to die of the lack of it? And it could have happened to us."

No-one answered him. Chekov and Uhura were still staring at the empty space where the holograph had stood. They knew only too well that it could indeed have happened to the Terran race, now populating so many vibrant worlds. It seemed a terrible kind of death, somehow far worse than the death of an individual.

Yet all of them might still die, the Vulcan knew, if he could not find some way to break through the impenetrable-seeming barriers the expert programming of the computers had imposed on them. The more he worked with them, the more Spock had become full of respect for their alien designers; they were indeed more advanced than any other design he had ever seen - the M5 had been but a baby in comparison to them.

The more he tried, the closer he came to believing his task was impossible, and there was little time left. Though the underground maze of corridors and chambers was vast, it appeared that life-support had not only been cut off, but the air was surely being extracted as well, or why after so short a time was the level of carbon dioxide so high that he was beginning to notice difficulty in breathing? He took a moment from his work to glance at his companions; they were definitely having more trouble with the atmosphere than he was. Jim shot him a purposeful glance; he knew how short the time was.

"Having difficulty, Spock?"

Jim sounded tired; there was no fooling him. He knew Spock was fallible, if less fallible than anyone else he had met. And Spock knew that Jim wouldn't blame him for failing; the thought spurred him on to new effort. He could not spare time now to think of their fate, to think of Jim, McCoy, all of them ending here because he, Spock, the supposed expert, couldn't overcome a computer's ancient programming. He could spare even less time to think of failing; grimly he carried on. He would carry on trying until the last breath

left his body. McCoy was always telling him he was stubborn; Spock himself never knew to which side of his nature he owed thanks for that particular characteristic.

But it was McCoy who gave him a lead when he could think of nothing else. Perhaps McCoy's earlier reference to the M5 had been more apt than he had suspected; while these computers showed none of the megalomaniac tendencies Daystrom's masterpiece had shown, they had displayed a certain illogicality - they appeared to wish to keep them in the complex, at whatever cost. It fitted in with a rather irrational theory he had been developing - it was almost as if the computers were so desperate for their complex to be peopled again that they would kill for it.

The machines were definitely capable of independent reasoning, and although they would be incapable of going against their programming, what if that programming included a directive that the computers must use any means at their disposal to ensure the population of the complex, or if they believed that they could not fulfill their function without people? It was just possible - but he still could not break through the programming to alter it.

But perhaps there was another way. Spock turned from the computer and looked at Jim. It might not work, but it just might. Either way, they didn't have much time left.

"Jim," said Spock urgently, "I am unable to change the programming; the designers did their job too well. But the computers can hear you, and are capable of reasoning. This may sound illogical, but I believe they are, in effect, lonely; they believe that they cannot function without people. You have to talk to them; try to convince them they must let us go, that our deaths will serve no useful purpose. I know the audio circuits are functioning. Please try, Jim. It is our only chance."

"I said it seemed like they were alive!" gasped Chekov through the semi-darkness. "But that sounds crazy - how can you convince a machine?"

"It is possible," replied the Vulcan quietly. "Remember Nomad?"

"Please try, Captain," Uhura added, the lack of oxygen apparent in her voice also. "I know Mr. Spock is right."

Kirk did, too, but he didn't know what to say; it felt strange, even after so many years spent in daily contact with machines so advanced they almost had a life of their own, to know that their only chance of survival lay in his reasoning with them. Surely Spock could reason better than he? Or maybe Spock thought logic wouldn't suffice this time. What did he think these alien computers would respond to - an emotional appeal?

He had to try it. The exertion his few steps away from his companions and nearer to the rows of electronic jailers took him, told him how short their air supply really was. And it was becoming very cold. Whatever he had to say, he had better say it quickly.

"Listen to me," he began, not knowing any other way to start. "I know you can hear me, and understand me. You know you are killing us. What good will that do you? We have seen the recording left by your makers - we know what happened to them, and we do understand. Because we did make it to the stars." He had to stop and take several breaths; they were all watching him, hoping he could save them - but he didn't know what to say.

"You must let us go," he went on. "Our deaths will not help you. If what you wish, what you need, is for your complex to be peopled again, then let us go. There are many planets, many peoples with the desire to become colonists on other worlds. Let us go and we will send them here. They will not die as your makers did, for they will not be stunted in their advancement - they will make this world better than it ever was. But if you don't let us go, and we die, then no-one will come and you will remain alone forever."

The lights flickered, then went out again, as if the computers were suddenly doubtful of their choice. Spock began to believe he had been right in his assessment.

"Go on, Jim," he urged. "It's working."

"Even if you let us live, turn life-support back on and keep us here, we would still die." Kirk had decided that the time had come for a bit of expedient lying. "Like your makers, we cannot live without outside stimulation, the challenge that the universe gives us. Would you have us die like they did? And be alone and unfulfilled forever? Let us go, and I will send people here - then your life can be as it was before. I promise. Do you wish to be always lonely?"

The lights flickered again, more strongly this time. A whoosh as the air supply momentarily came on again was heard. The lights continued to flicker violently as the computers fought with themselves, undecided.

"Let us go, and I promise you will not be alone!" Kirk drove the point home.

The lights came on, and fresh, breathable air flooded into the chamber. Spock was already working at a console, and found to his relief that the programming was no longer barred to him. After a few moments he stood up and took out his communicator. He snapped it open, and was rewarded by the familiar bleeping noise.

"Spock to Enterprise."

"Mr. Spock - is that you?" came the relieved tones of Montgomery Scott. "Are ye all right? When the communicators went dead I feared the worst. Now the transporter room's reporting that they're operational again. I take it ye've sorted those computers out?"

"We are all functional, Mr. Scott, but it was the Captain who 'sorted the computers out', as you put it," replied the Vulcan cryptically. A good job McCoy wasn't there to accuse him of a sense of humour.

"The Captain?" Scotty was definitely puzzled.

"Kirk here, Scotty." The Captain had his communicator out now. "Never mind about my expertise now. Four to beam up, then another two. Spock will give you the coordinates."

"Transporter room ready, Captain."

"Very well, Mr. Scott. Energise."

* * *

"Are you telling me, Spock," said McCoy good-naturedly as he, Kirk and the Vulcan walked along the corridor towards the Captain's cabin, "that the only reason we're all alive and well is that those computers responded to an emotional appeal? Logic didn't do anything for them, huh?" McCoy's relief at finding himself and the rapidly-sinking Peters suddenly transported aboard the Enterprise had put him in a distinctly good mood, helped of course by the fact that Peters would recover. Chekov would be fine in a few days, too, though he'd be off duty for a while.

"All computers function by logic, Doctor," Spock insisted. "It is only the programming which can be at fault. In this case the original inhabitants of the complex had so impressed on the memory circuits that their function was to protect and aid those inhabitants, the computers came to reason that without humanoid life in the complex their programming was unfulfilled."

"But you admitted to Jim that their behaviour was illogical." McCoy wouldn't give up. "And you have to agree that it was Jim's appeal to their better nature that made them release us."

"Indeed, Doctor; the Captain does have a way with words," Spock solemnly

agreed as the three of them walked through the door into Kirk's cabin. "But now that I have altered their programming, such an occasion will not arise again."

"No, it won't," put in Kirk, still grinning at his friends' eternal verbal fencing. "And whether they really can feel loneliness or not, that occasion won't arise again either. There'll be plenty of people there to keep them company once Starfleet is informed of what Spock has discovered."

"Oh, what's that? You been keeping secrets, Spock?" McCoy's interest was aroused.

"No secrets, Doctor," replied the Vulcan, "merely the discovery of what the labyrinth dwellers' underground source of energy really was. Dilithium crystals. The tricorder didn't register them until the Captain convinced the computers to stop blocking all our equipment."

"Dilithium?" McCoy gave a low whistle. "I see what you mean. And I suppose that the advanced design of those machines themselves will benefit Federation science?"

"It will, Bones," Kirk answered for his First Officer. "I'm glad about that - I hate to see anyone unfulfilled, even a computer. But this whole episode makes me wonder... How many more races are there in the galaxy who haven't achieved space travel? How many more peoples haven't fulfilled their potential? The thought of how it might have happened to us makes me shudder. I can't stop thinking about the sadness on the face of that holograph recording."

"I believe the labyrinth dwellers will prove the exception to the rule, Jim," Spock said thoughtfully. "It is only logical to assume that most races, once their advancement is sufficient, will leave their home planets and go out into the galaxy. It is what we were meant to do."

"If logic says that," McCoy decided, "then I'll agree with it for once. But come on, Spock - give me an answer of this. We've seen machines before that are so advanced they've almost achieved consciousness. Well, these computers here are that advanced, and they didn't seem to be happy. They were lonely, Spock - lonely for people. What do you say to that? You can't deny it."

"As I said before, Doctor, the original programming was to blame for the irrational behaviour displayed by the labyrinth computers. But I cannot argue with your assertion; they did display what can only be described as loneliness."

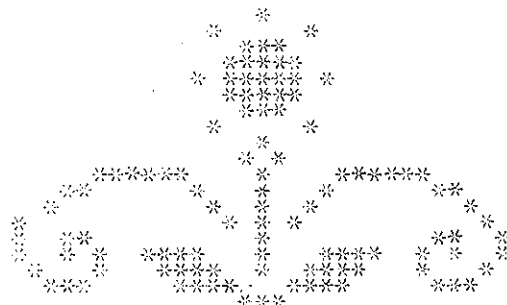
"Spock - you're agreeing with him?"

"Indeed, Captain. Wherever we have travelled in the galaxy, it has become more obvious to me that there is a great deal of truth in one of your old Earth quotations - John Donne was the originator, I believe."

"'No man is an island?'" quoted Kirk, knowing full well what Spock was admitting.

"That was the quotation, Captain."

Or no Vulcan? thought McCoy. But he didn't say it out loud. He didn't need to.



RECOLLECTIONS

by

Ann Preece

The Vulcan sat in the semi-darkness of his cabin on board the Enterprise, his fingers steeped in the all-too-familiar pose of one deep in meditation. But although outwardly calm, Spock's inner thoughts were in acute turmoil, as the excitement of the preceeding days had at last begun to take its toll, the strain almost proving too great for him.

So much had occurred over the last few weeks: the failure of Kolinahr - which somehow, in the light of past events, did not seem so important now; the fleeting moment when his mind had felt Kirk's thoughts reaching out to touch his across the light-years which separated them; his departure from Vulcan - for the second - and perhaps final? - time; and the emotional reaction to his return to the Enterprise - all these factors had contributed, in some way, to his present state of mind. And the previous day's encounter with V'ger, coupled with the highly-charged emotional scene in Sickbay which had followed, had proved the catalyst which had helped to break his iron reserve.

Now, sitting in his almost-deserted quarters - his few possessions had still not been unpacked - with just the light from the firepot casting an eerie glow on the sombre features of the man who sat so still, Spock allowed his mind to carry him back to those early days - to the very start of the five-year mission - a mission which was to have such a profound effect on him, both as an officer and - more important - as a person.

Unbidden, memories and scenes from his past life danced before his eyes and he remembered...

How clearly he remembered his very first meeting with James Kirk - 'the youngest Captain in the Fleet' - as he stepped down off the transporter pad at the start of his first command mission. Spock had prepared himself for such a meeting, but what he had not prepared himself for was his first glimpse of the magnetic personality who was to turn his well-prepared existence upside down with just a flash of that sunny smile, the warmth and sparkle of those hazel eyes. From that very first meeting the 'chemistry' was there, that special, indefinable bond which drew them together over the wide gulf of their differing backgrounds and cultures, to form a friendship which could not be weakened by distance or destroyed by the passage of time.

That 'spark' had been present from the very first moment of contact, Spock could admit that now, and over the years it had grown and flourished, nurtured by understanding, care, and - if he was honest - love.

Theirs was a unique partnership - the first Human/Vulcan command team in Starfleet - built on mutual respect, trust and loyalty - a partnership with the cynics believed could not possibly survive the demands made on it. How wrong 'They' had been. Both strong in character and personality, each as stubborn and as determined as the other - when the need arose - they were the ideal team, the one complementing the other perfectly. One one occasion, Kirk had called him 'the best First Officer in Starfleet'. Remembering that moment now, Spock allowed a half-smile to flicker briefly across his face: how could he have been otherwise when he served an exceptional Captain, who commanded the finest Starship in the Fleet?

On reflection, Spock realised that he had never met anyone quite like Kirk before, had never shared such affinity with another person - and a Human. Always alone, both at home on Vulcan, and later at Starfleet Academy, his Vulcan reserve had made him appear cool and aloof to those who might have taken the time to probe below the outer shell, had they but received just a glimmer of encouragement. Captain Pike had tried, to a certain extent, and in part had been successful in breaking through the wall which Spock had built around himself, but while he remained intensely loyal to Pike, and would defend his former Captain to the last - as, indeed, he had - the Vulcan walls of loneliness

remained virtually unscaled and intact.

Then along came Kirk, and Spock realised that he did not want to be alone again.

Just one look at the warmth in those laughing eyes and he was lost, his carefully constructed barriers crumbling beneath Kirk's open gestures of friendship, the mantle of loneliness being replaced by the warm glow of companionship. There were no sides to Kirk - he accepted his First Officer for himself, not for what he should be: it was a rare and precious gift to a Vulcan/Human hybrid who felt that he did not - could not - belong on either world.

From the first tentative steps, their friendship had grown and blossomed. Over the years they had shared much, each depending on the other for help and support in times of trouble, times of need; the loneliness of a command position and the loneliness of being an 'outsider' drawing them closer together. For the first time in his life Spock could admit that he had met someone whom he was proud to call 'friend', someone who could become the brother he never had. That Kirk reciprocated those feelings never ceased to amaze him.

Spock leaned back in his chair, his eyes closed, as the memories continued to present themselves before his mind's eye. Analysing his thoughts, he could pin-point the precise moment when their relationship - until then one of duty from a First Officer to his Captain - had undergone a subtle change, when the small flames of friendship were kindled and fanned into greater life, and a bond was formed of such strength and beauty that it would survive the trials and tribulations which the future would undoubtedly bring.

He remembered - all too clearly - the day that Gary Mitchell died on Delta-Vega, how he had wanted to help Kirk and ease the burden of grief and guilt by offering a few words of comfort to a commanding officer who had so recently lost a friend - yet he found that he could not. His Vulcan upbringing would not permit him to say the necessary words he knew Kirk needed to hear, and his hesitant words, 'I feel for him, too', seemed so inadequate. Yet Kirk had understood - as he was always to understand.

As the months passed their newly-formed friendship deepened, and their dependence on each other also grew. They found that they spent more and more of their off-duty periods together, enjoying quiet evenings engaged in games of chess; listening to music they both loved; idle chatter; and companionable silences, for there were times when words were unnecessary, when a simple look or gesture could convey an unspoken message just as well. Passage of time only served to strengthen their relationship, despite the pressures made on it by external forces, for neither of them could be certain what each new day would bring in the way of fresh dangers. Ever-present at the back of Spock's mind was the very real fear that one day Kirk would not return from one of their missions, and he would be alone again, as he once had been. If that had happened, although he believed he could continue to function efficiently in his chosen career, he knew the necessary spark of his existence would be missing - his life would be but an empty shell: he would exist, but he would not live, for he believed that if Kirk died, an essential part of himself would die also.

And there had been times when he had thought that Kirk was lost to him...

His recollections evoked painful memories of his first Fan Farr when - through loyalty to his friend - Kirk had defied Starfleet orders, almost jeopardising his career in the process, to take him to Vulcan in an attempt to save his life. And how had he repaid that trust? Spock shuddered at the memory: in a moment of madness he had very nearly killed Kirk... killed the one person who meant so much to him. Even now, he could still see Kirk's limp form, the ahn woon twisted tightly around his throat; still feel McCoy's hands pushing him away from the body of his friend; still hear T'Pol's words, 'Live long and prosper, Spock', and his own reply, 'I will do neither. I have killed my Captain - and my friend.' With that knowledge had come the stark realisation that, with Kirk's death, his own purpose and reason for living had been removed:

life held nothing for him, except a return to the emptiness and loneliness he had known before...

Then the miracle had happened: Kirk had not died - he was alive. Alive! It had all been a carefully-contrived plan on McCoy's part to return Kirk to the Enterprise without the Vulcans suspecting anything out of the ordinary. Spock remembered how the sound of that well-loved voice had sent a warm glow throughout his entire being. He had known that all he was experiencing, all his joyous feelings, were mirrored on his face, in his eyes - and he had found that he did not care. His excuse for his over-emotional outburst had sounded feeble even to his own ears, but he was past caring. He knew the truth - as did Kirk - and that was all that mattered.

Over the years they had come to depend on each other in times of need, for help, support, and comfort, far outside the realms of mere duty. Spock had lost count of the number of occasions when Kirk had been there to assist when he was hurt or in trouble; likewise, any danger which threatened Kirk, threatened Spock also, for he would willingly have sacrificed his own life if, by so doing, Kirk would be saved. As had once been remarked - in another time, another place - his place would always be by Jim Kirk's side.

Spock allowed a very Human sigh to escape his lips. Noble sentiments indeed. Yet, despite all that, he had been prepared to walk away from the life he had known - leave behind the one person who had come to mean more to him than life itself - in an attempt to achieve his ultimate goal: Kolinahr; to purge himself of the Human emotions which, he now knew, were a necessary part of his existence. It had taken an encounter with a machine to show him how blind he had been, to make him realise that the suppression of his Human half was wrong - that that side of him was just as important as the Vulcan in him. Strange, that it had taken him so long to accept that which Kirk had accepted so long ago.

Two years of rigorous Vulcan discipline had crumbled to dust after the fleeting mind-contact with Kirk which was to return him to his rightful place among the stars. He now knew, beyond any shadow of doubt, that Kirk had need of him - perhaps had always needed him. And if any doubts and uncertainties had remained, they were dissipated in the aftermath of V'ger and the scene in Sickbay.

Now the doubts, worries and fears of the preceding days had vanished. He had had a decision to make, and he knew that, in the light of recent experiences, his decision to remain was the right one. This time he was 'home' to stay - he would not leave again.

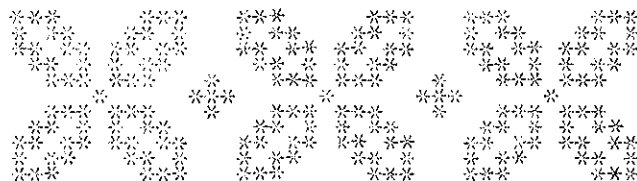
Detecting a slight sound outside in the corridor even before the door buzzer sounded, Spock uncurling his long frame from the chair and rose slowly to his feet, a warm smile of welcome lighting his features. And as he called, "Come!" he knew instinctively who would be framed in the doorway.

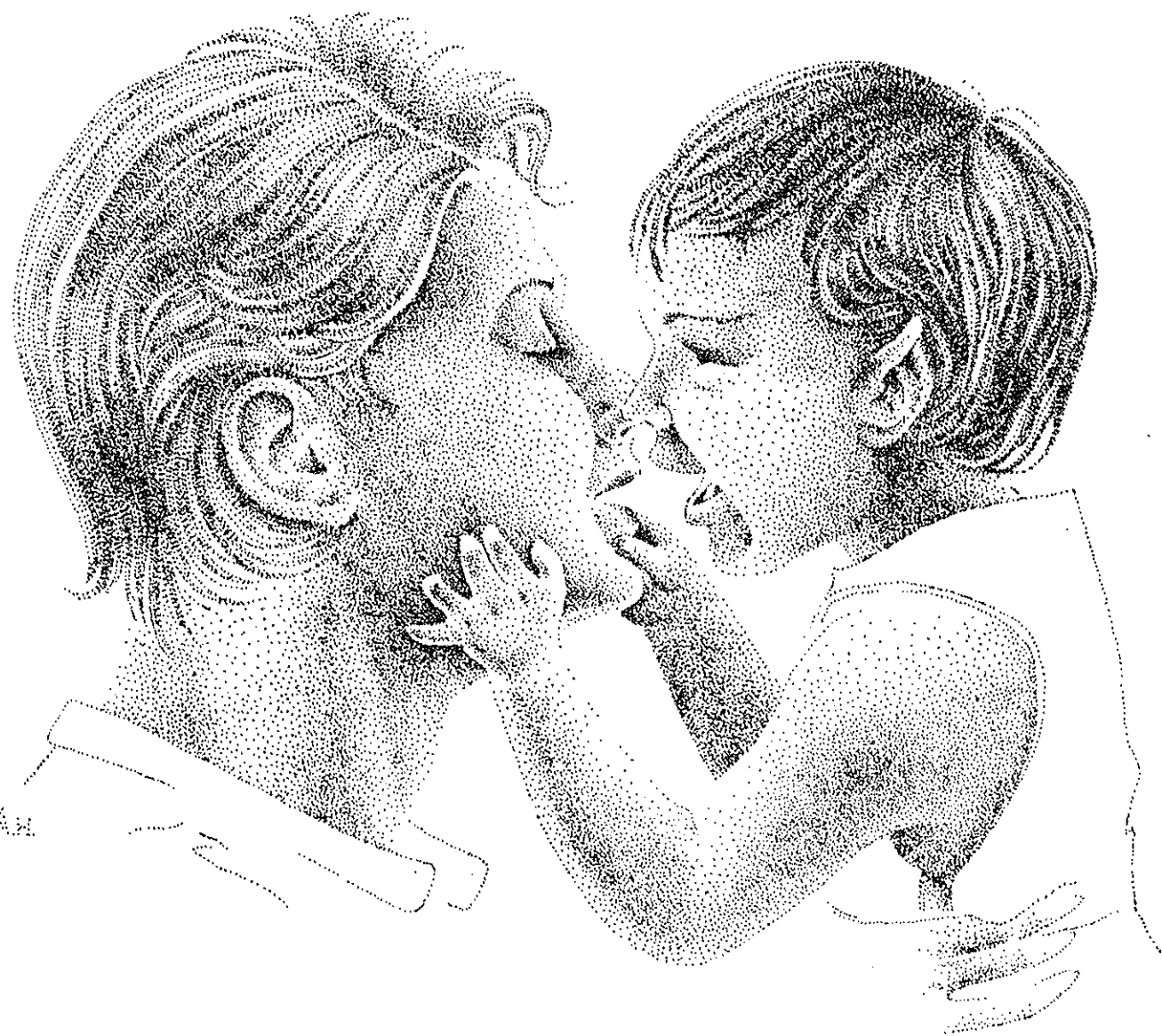
The door slid silently open, and the object of Spock's thoughts stood hesitantly on the threshold.

"I felt... I thought... perhaps you needed to talk..."

Spock nodded, briefly. "Indeed, Jim. I believe we both need to talk..."

Relieved, Kirk sank into the chair indicated, and as Spock sat down opposite his mind-voice murmured, //Yes, Jim, you were right. I need you as much as you need me. I will never leave you again.//





SON OF VULCAN

by

Janice Pitkethley

TROUBLED TIMES

or

A day in the life of...

Amanda lay awake in the darkness, her mind too active to sleep. How glad she felt that the trying day was over; she dreaded the thought of another one ahead.

The reason for her unsettled thoughts was Spock. He was almost a year old now, and she found it more and more difficult not to interfere with Sarek's method of training him in the Vulcan rules and way of life. It seemed harsh and cruel to Amanda. Many times Spock had looked at her in confusion, and she had forced herself to say, "Do as your father wishes." Now, alone with her thoughts, the dark eyes haunted her.

Pink streaks of the coming dawn lit the sky before Amanda finally slept. The auto-alarm brought her from an uneasy sleep, and with a heavy heart she rose to face the new day.

Through the stillness of the house she heard the faint unsteady footsteps, and rushed to open the door. She couldn't help smiling at the sight of the diminutive figure weaving along the hallway. When Spock caught sight of his mother he lost his balance and sat down with a bump.

"Come on, before your father sees you." Amanda gathered him into her arms. "Please, be good today and do everything your father tells you," she said as she carried him into his own room.

A little while later Amanda was in the kitchen, busily preparing breakfast. Spock stood watching everything she did. When all was ready she placed him at the table and summoned Sarek.

Spock looked up as the tall figure entered the room. Sarek greeted Amanda, then his son. He nodded gravely when Spock haltingly returned the greeting, pronouncing the words clearly and correctly. Already he was becoming quite fluent in both Vulcan and English.

Sarek corrected Spock when he reached for the wrong piece of cutlery, and frowned in disapproval as he tried to comply. The little Vulcan was very unsteady, and dropped food on the sparkling white tablecloth. Sarek did not speak, but watched as Amanda hastened to wipe it up. She saw the flash of fear in Spock's eyes, and prayed that Sarek had not noticed, but she had to fight back the angry retort that rose to her lips.

//He's not even a year old yet!// she thought as she took her place at the table once more. //Vulcan standards are high, but maybe Sarek expects too much of Spock.// She swiftly stopped the train of thought as she met Sarek's steady gaze; perhaps he knew her illogical thought... The meal passed without further incident.

Mornings were spent in instruction, Sarek already teaching Spock the Vulcan philosophies and way of life. He also taught him to be independent, and most of all to conceal his emotions. In the afternoons Sarek went to the Embassy, and Spock was left with Amanda.

"What did Father tell you today?" she would ask him as soon as the aircar departed. She encouraged him to talk, knowing that his vocabulary would improve even further. "Was Father displeased with you?" she asked.

"No..." came the small voice in answer.

Amanda would not go out during the greatest heat of the day. She would make a tray with cold drinks for herself and Spock and they would sit in the main lounge, the coolest part of the house. Amanda read stories from the varied collection she had brought from Earth.

"What will we have today?" she asked, looking through the titles.

She selected a volume of Earth's classical stories, famous legends and folklore. Spock sat on the floor at her feet, listening enthralled as Amanda read of worlds unknown where princesses and giants, dragons and ogres lived. She read slowly, stopping to explain the meaning of many things. Sometimes Spock would interrupt when he did not understand.

"What's that...?"

Amanda paused to tell him and read on until she saw the dark eyes becoming cloudy.

"You are tired." She closed the book, returning it to the shelf. She smiled as the little hand gripped hers as they walked along the hallway. Spock had been mobile for some time now, but was still unsteady at times, falling often.

He removed his shoes with some difficulty and Amanda lifted him onto the bed. She stayed in the room until the signs of sleep became apparent, the fixed gaze blank, then crept away to attend to her household tasks for a while.

These done, she sat down with her sewing. Amanda liked this hour, the stillness of the house with the shutters closed against the harsh Vulcan sun. Her thoughts were far away as she sewed, most of them concerning Spock and Sarek. So far, Spock had managed not to displease his father, but the day was not over yet.

"He does expect too much of Spock sometimes... Ouch!" Amanda winced as she pricked her finger. "Do this, do that... do it yourself... do not ask your mother for assistance... Sarek does not seem to realise that there are some things Spock just cannot cope with. He is too small. No, Sarek; you are wrong, in some cases... He still needs assistance."

Amanda's thoughts wandered idly as she plied her needle. She stopped and put the work away as she heard sound from the hallway.

"Spock...?"

She went to investigate.

"And where do you think you are going?" she laughed as she caught up with him.

Spock replied with what sounded like gibberish; Amanda wasn't sure whether it was Vulcan or mixed-up English or a combination of both.

"What? Say it again," she prompted.

Another word or two of Vulcan followed, and then, "...drink..."

She decided to let him have his own way to see what he would do, and followed him through the doorway. The water-dispenser towered above his head and he reached up, but would never manage to reach it. Amanda stopped him when he tried to climb up on a chair.

"Oh no you don't!" She filled the cup for him. "Your father is correct in some ways, but not in others. He is asking you to do the impossible."

The early evening passed without incident, then Sarek returned from the Embassy.

"It is like the calm before the storm," Amanda thought as she looked at her husband and son. Sarek was using the reader tape, and Spock sat in fascinated study of a book containing pictures of Earth scenery and wild life.

"Time you got ready for bed." Amanda glanced at the wall chronometer.

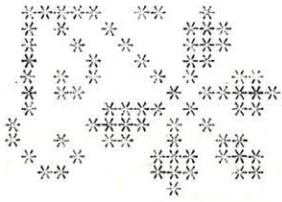
"No." Spock continued to turn the pages of the book.

At once Sarek was on his feet. "Your statement is illogical and disrespectful. Obey your mother," he ordered sternly. "You are Vulcan, and Vulcans do

BABEL - BETWEEN THE LINES

by

Sue Meek



The corridors on Deck 5 were busy this evening. Kirk nodded and smiled politely as he was greeted by two passing members of the Arcturan ambassador's party. He was beginning to wonder whether his smile would wear out before the end of the fortnight; barely a day had passed since the full complement of ambassadors arrived on board, yet he felt as though he had already smiled enough polite, diplomatic smiles and mouthed enough platitudes to last a lifetime.

He halted outside his First Officer's quarters, hesitating an instant as he pondered the wisdom of his actions, and whether Spock would welcome his presence. Nevertheless, after the incident in Engineering with Spock's father, he had determined to speak to him, so, squaring his shoulders, he activated the intercom and asked for permission to enter.

There was a slight pause, then the door slid open to admit him. Spock was sitting at his desk, head resting on steepled fingers. A familiar enough pose; yet to Kirk, who knew how to recognise the signs, he exuded an aura of tension; the Vulcan shileds were firmly in place.

"Captain? There are still another fifteen point two minutes before we are due to attend the reception."

"Yeah, I know, Spock... I arrived early on purpose." Kirk took a deep breath, and continued. "Listen, I know it's not really any of my business, and I don't want to intrude... but I'm sorry for putting my big foot in it earlier with your father."

He almost expected a typically Spockian joke on the literalism of his phrasing, but was greeted by nothing but a stoney silence, which Kirk felt obligated to fill with further words.

"What I said in Engineering... and on the Hangar Deck... I hope I didn't embarrass you."

Spock's reply was a reflection of Sarek's earlier words. "Embarrassment is a Human emotion."

"Nevertheless, there is obviously a situation of some tension existing between your father and yourself. I just hope my actions didn't exacerbate it."

Again, it appeared that his words had evoked little response. Spock's face was shuttered, his back ramrod straight, Vulcan armour clearly in position. It was never easy to talk to Spock when he was like this. Kirk was reminded momentarily of the day in these very rooms when he had virtually had to pry the truth about pon farr from Spock.

He sighed. "Spock..."

"I can assure you, Captain," Spock said stiffly at last, "that any... differences between my father and myself will not in any way be allowed to affect our mission adversely."

"I never thought they would," Kirk said gently. "You're much too good an officer for that. Your mother explained afterwards," he admitted, "about your disagreement with Sarek over a choice of career. I guess my attempts to be helpful... weren't, very," he said sheepishly. "Still..." he chided gently, "if you'd told me about this beforehand, I might not have made such a successful exhibition of my talent for putting my foot in it."

"It is a private matter. One which does not affect ship's status or operation," Spock replied formally. There was a subliminal note of tension in the cool voice. "Your further 'assitance' - and interference - will not be

required."

"Okay, Spock. Point taken." Kirk's shoulders slumped a little as he turned away. He understood the reasons for Spock's attitude: the tension that his father's presence and behaviour were creating; that Sarek's rebuttal was reviving potentially painful memories; that Spock was over-compensating by trying to be doubly Vulcan, to live up to some impossible image he probably thought his father expected him to maintain. Added to that would be the obvious curiosity of the crew, to whom word would by now have spread that his family was on board, so that Spock would need to distance himself a little in order to continue functioning in his normal manner. But of late, Spock had been relaxing that rigid Vulcan pose a little with him. They had been growing closer, and the developing bond between them had become very important to Kirk. Spock had often been there for him with quiet but tangible support in times of difficulty; now it seemed he was not to be allowed to reciprocate. He understood... but the rebuff still stung a little.

"Just remember," he said, moving towards the door, "I'm speaking as your friend as well as your Captain."

A little of that hurt must have bled over into his voice and reached the Vulcan, because Spock called after him.

"Captain, please do not - Jim..." The voice was hesitant, but had softened considerably. "Your concern is noted... and appreciated."

Kirk turned back. Their eyes met, and though Spock's features remained stern his gaze was warm, acknowledging Kirk's gesture for what it was.

Kirk walked back across the room, perching himself on the edge of Spock's desk.

"Wanna talk about it? We have a few minutes before the reception." He smiled sympathetically, eyes conveying the message that he meant only to be supportive, not intrusive.

After a moment Spock began to speak. "There is not a great deal to tell, really, Jim. My mother appears to have acquainted you with the basic facts of the situation. My father and his father before him had served at the Vulcan Science Academy in their earlier years. Sarek expected me to follow automatically in his footsteps. I had always been an obedient son, and adhered to his wishes. However, over the years of my adolescence I had come to realise that my path did not lie in that direction." He paused for a moment, looking abstracted, and Kirk guessed that he was reliving events which had led to his decision to leave Vulcan - a path which he had surmised from previous conversations could not have been easy.

"There comes a point in life when one must choose one's own destiny. When Sarek learned of my wish to join Starfleet Academy, he was... disappointed in what he saw as my failure to fulfil my obligations. He also disapproved of the militaristic outlook of Starfleet and felt that on active service I might be forced to compromise my principles as a Vulcan. I never expected approval... but acceptance would have sufficed. Instead he gave me an ultimatum: either follow the path of Tradition, or join Starfleet - and cease to be regarded as his son."

"Well, it's obvious what you decided."

"Indeed. I could understand Father's position - but one cannot mould one's life according to the concepts of another. The decision I made was the only logical choice. I still believe it was the correct one."

There was a slight edge of defiance in Spock's voice, yet also a fleeting glimmer of pain in his eyes.

Knowing how important a part the family played in Vulcan life, Kirk understood the pain that severance must have inflicted, making life for a young Vulcan who already had to cope with the rigours of a half-breed existence.

even more difficult. He felt a momentary surge of antipathy towards Sarek - an emotion which on a ship where he needed to maintain the status quo he knew he could not afford.

He suppressed the feeling, and said soothingly, "Parents are often the last to realise what their children really need. I remember a few... colourful family discussions about my decision to enter the Academy." He chuckled in reminiscence, and continued more seriously, "Dad dying in the service, and Sam already being away at college didn't help, of course... though it was all settled amicably in the end." He paused, determined not to become entangled in his own memories.

"You're right, of course. In the end, you have to make your own decisions about your own life." Suddenly it became very important to him that Spock be made to feel as though there was a place for him, that he belonged somewhere. "Maybe I'm biased, because otherwise the Enterprise wouldn't have the best First Officer in the Fleet, but I think you made the right decision. Your chosen career obviously suits your talents. Vulcan's loss..." He paused, wondering whether to use a less emotive alternative, such as 'the ship', or 'Starfleet', but decided in favour of expressing his real feelings, "... is my gain."

Spock did not acknowledge this verbally, but he did not flinch away. His silence and the look in his eyes were acknowledgement enough for Kirk that Spock recognised the depth of friendship between them.

"Do you want to be reconciled with Sarek?" Kirk asked eventually.

Spock considered for a moment. "Yes," he said at last, "if only for the peace of mind it would bring to my mother."

"Yeah." Kirk smiled. "She's quite a lady. Is there anything I can do to help?" he asked sincerely.

"Not really, Jim; though I do, as I said, appreciate your concern. It is a situation that can only be resolved between us. And it is almost," Spock added, "time for us to attend the reception."

"Yeah, guess we'd better go. Wouldn't do for us to be late." Kirk eased himself off the desk and walked with Spock towards the door. "Do you think Sarek will unbend at all?"

"I am... dubious," Spock replied. "He has shown no signs of moving over the past eighteen years. He is a proud man, and on some issues has been known to be intransigent."

"Stubborn, you mean," Kirk translated, and, eyes sparkling, said teasingly, "Runs in the family, maybe?"

Spock lifted an eyebrow slightly, but declined to take the bait.

"Anyway," Kirk said more seriously, "if you want to talk, or anything... you know I'm here."

Spock nodded gravely before pressing the door release.

Kirk gave a little tug to his dress tunic, and squared his shoulders. "Let's go, Mr. Spock. I feel," he confessed as they marched into the corridor, "a little like Daniel walking into the lions' den."

"I fail to see," Spock responded, deadpan, "what resemblance a gathering of Federation ambassadors bears to such a scenario."

"Oh no? With one half of them mad as hell at the other half over the Coridan issue and everything else, and us in the middle, I'd consider the analogy quite appropriate."

"I'm sure you will handle any problems with your usual skill, Captain," Spock said smoothly, and Kirk turned to catch the fleeting glint of humour in his First Officer's eyes. "And," he added in an undertone, "I have never

